University of Alberta

Moving Forward: A Narrative Inquiry into the Transition Experiences of Parents and Teachers to Schools of Choice

by

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DEDICATION

For Jean

a gifted teacher, mentor, and researcher

whose presence

has inspired me from the very beginning of my life as teacher

and will forever influence the way I, and so many other fortunate students,

view the unfolding parade.

I am honoured to be your last masters student.

ABSTRACT

This study is a narrative inquiry into the transition experience of one parent and one teacher to an alternative school landscape. Prior to beginning the inquiry, I too joined a school of choice, an experience which left me with a personal desire to understand the complexities of these dynamic landscapes from the different vantage points of the participants in these schools.

The advent of alternative schools for children, parents, and teachers has altered the way schools, as traditionally thought of as being attached to a particular neighbourhood or locale, are being defined. Students, teachers, and parents may seek out a 'school of choice' that reflects their personal beliefs, aspirations, or interests. The selection of an alternative school foregrounds issues of competition, identity, choice, and community.

This study seeks to understand the issues that emerge from hearing one parent's and one teacher's stories of making the decision to attend, of settling into, and of living in, an alternative school landscape. Initially, these stories are heard separately. I then examined the ways in which these stories resonate with one another and with my own story of transition to an alternative school. Using the metaphor of a circle I have laid these stories side by side and viewed them from the different vantage points that make up the story of school. Ultimately, this inquiry hopes to address the research puzzle: What are the transition stories of one parent and one teacher at a school of choice and how are these stories connected to, and challenging, the narrative notion of identity, that is, 'stories to live by'?

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There are so many people for whom I feel grateful. Specifically, those friends and colleagues that lived my school stories and walked along side me, those amazing individuals that shared their stories with me, and those that supported me in my effort to explore and shape these stories in written form. I would also like to extend my most sincere thanks to:

***Jean** – for the magical way you inspired, motivated, and guided me along this journey and for allowing me to see more clearly, the story I was living*

***Ingrid and Bill** – for the thoughtful and caring conversation about this work*

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***Julia** – for the hours of conversations and laughter while in the land of OZ*

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Introduction

-----Original Message-----

Hi Michelle,
> I keep thinking about our discussion on Tuesday about school programs. I did some more checking into our community school and there have been
> several staff changes there in the last 2 years, especially in gr.1.
> Thanks for your ideas and thoughts
> After watching you on Tuesday and hearing the ways in which you teach I had to think again about what will be the best place for Chad.① I would
> love for you to teach him Michelle. Chris and I have been talking about it and I need to go and take a look so I have a better sense of knowing.
> I am now still thinking about your school as a possibility. I am planning on coming over to have a look. Could I visit you and
> your class and would you be able to introduce me to the k teacher?

>I need to see the sites and then I think I'll know what
> to do. I am planning on taking a day to
> just do some visits.
> Also what do you know about the application and interview process? I went
> onto the web site and read a bit there.
> thanks for helping me out. it is all so different being in the parent side
> of this.
>Daniella (Email, 1998)

①. Unless otherwise noted, pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND

My interest in "schools of choice," or alternative schools, has evolved out of my own experiences teaching at a highly profiled alternative school in an urban district. While this school has been a magical place to learn and grow, coming to the school was the most difficult transition I have ever made—to a school or otherwise. This is, I believe, a significant statement as change has been welcome in my life. My experiences have been marked by alternative paths and include two years teaching overseas at an International School in the Philippines. My interest in writing about this experience first began largely as a therapeutic means to help me reflect upon my situation with the hope that understanding would soon follow. As I wrote and conversed with others about my experiences, however, I became more and more aware that my story of transition was part of a larger story that reflected the changing profile of schools as they have traditionally been defined.

The schools which I speak of are often called "schools of choice," "magnet schools," or "alternative schools." For the purposes of this study, a school of choice is defined as a school that attracts families and students because of specific programs offered. Programs are diverse in areas such as language, academics, arts, science, and athletics. Schools of choice are becoming a very popular alternative to the neighbourhood school in communities across North America. Data for Edmonton Public Schools, a

district that has been at the forefront of this change, suggests the staggering popularity of this approach. In the 2003–2004 school year the district offered 31 alternative programs in over 80 schools. Edmonton Public Schools noted that, "49 percent of elementary students, 56 percent of junior high students, and 62 percent of senior high students attended a school other than their designated school" (2004, p. 2).

The term "landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) was chosen to describe the context of schools of choice, or alternative schools. This notion encompasses the ideas of space, place, and time and allows for a broader view of school context beyond, but not excluding, the physical structure. Landscape includes the people, the policies, and the dynamics of all the forces at play in an individual school. Landscape "has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships" (p. 4).

While my initial desire to understand my school landscape centred on self-preservation, it was the experiences of my new colleagues who shared my beginnings at this place, and witnessing the experiences of new staff each year since, that affirmed for me the existence of a puzzle worth researching. I began to wonder: What dynamics are at play on this school landscape that leads to so much discomfort as individuals struggle to make this place their own? What are the motivations for individual parents and teachers to seek out a school of choice? And do the stories of transition that live in one school of choice resonate with the stories of transition in others?

The Parade of Players - On the Landscape

"The writer sits a long time watching people come and go. He watches their faces change when they enter...." (Rylant, 1995, p. 52)

Beginning With a Story...

It was a warm June afternoon when my class and I eagerly headed to the gym for our big performance. In line ahead of me was a whole cast of characters—Charlie Chaplin, W. C. Fields, Abbot and Costello, George and Gracie, chorus girls, star lights, gypsies, artists, magicians, and dancers. I could tell by the way they held themselves that the performance had begun already—these were not just third grade students heading down the hall—these were the great vaudeville performers of the '20s and '30s. The energy the cast emitted was tangible in the small space as we found our places. Titters of nervous laughter escaped as props were adjusted and positions shifted.

The audience filled quickly with the parents, classes of students, and teachers who had come to watch our performance. The children held their poses perfectly as the audience settled, allowing only the slightest broadening of smiles as they recognized their families. The piano began to play and this cast became alive finding each beat, each entrance, perfectly on cue. The transformation was amazing. Just yesterday there had been chaos as we practiced each part and rehearsed the production. Charlie had been distracted by his friends and missed his cue, the cancan girls were in a fight, and our

starlight had forgotten the words to her song. Yet in front of me was none of that. From somewhere deep inside each child had found what they needed to make their performance perfect. It was magic.

I blinked hard to push away the tears I knew were threatening and smiled broadly at these children. As the last artist closed the show, I turned toward the audience and saw the same heartfelt expressions on the faces of their parents. Grade 3 students once again, the children bounced off to find their visitors. The space echoed with chatter and laughter and pride. Parents came over to say "hi" and "thanks" but one parent in particular came up and remarked to me, "It must be moments like this that make teaching feel so rewarding." It is. It is moments like this that sustain me for all kinds of reasons. It's not just the big performances, though, it's the small moments too, where learning is tangible and connections real. This moment was all of that but it was also one of those perfect times when I knew that the parents in my room and I saw this event in the same way. The borders that at times separate us as parent and teacher were blurred and blended into one very proud team who wanted the same thing for these children.

Schools are storied landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Parents and teachers are cast as characters in these stories. In neighbourhood schools, I noticed that parents and teachers often live their parts without seeming to question who they are in relation to one another. However, parents and teachers in a school of choice are drawn together in a different way. For in these spaces, the players (parents and teachers) are not randomly brought together as one might find in a neighbourhood school. These are the

landscapes where the players come together—sometimes travelling great distances—because of a dream or a belief or a hope that this school will offer something that is not found elsewhere. I chose the school I work in. And the parents in my classroom chose the school for their children. Our identities are thus interwoven, yet our stories remain separate. The borders between parents and teachers, in this respect, are maintained.

All of our stories are in continual states of change. School stories are not unique in this way. The emergence of schools of choice is just one example of a change that has occurred in public education within the past decade. However, while some attention is paid to how schools can involve parents, little attention has been paid to parents' experiences in schools of choice. Even less has been paid to how choosing a school of choice influences and is influenced by who parents and teachers are, that is to their "stories to live by" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, p. 100).

I cannot begin to reflect on the stories of other places and people without first acknowledging my own lived experiences. As I attend to my experience, I must also attend to the context within which these stories are constructed.

As a teacher I live in the classroom space with my students. As I begin each year, my focus and anticipation is around those new faces that will greet me and the story that we will compose together. It is as though the students and I are the centre of a circle and the parents, while on the same landscape, form a secondary circle around the outside. As the school year evolves the circle becomes more fluid as the outside players (the parents) step inwards and we (teacher and students) extend our centre space to include them.

There are points, such as musical production, where these places intersect and our circle expands to encompass all. It seems as though this is only a temporary blending after which the parents, teacher, and students resume our places, forming our inside and outside circles once again.

If this is true in most schools, our separateness becomes especially distinct in a school of choice, where the students, the families, and the teachers do not have the connection of a common community that surrounds the school to naturally extend our stories beyond the walls of the classroom.

As a teacher, I know all kinds of things about the children, my students. I know how they learn best, their likes and dislikes, the friends they hold dear, the hurts they have endured, and even the rhythms of their school day. However, in a school of choice, very often the story I don't know is how the children and their parents have come to this school. I wonder what stories their parents would tell of making that decision, of settling in and living in a school of choice. I wonder what they know of my coming to this school of choice. And I wonder, I wonder if the edges of their stories overlap with the edges of my own. These wonders are the impetus for this narrative inquiry.

> Pushor (2001) writes that participants (parents and teachers)
>
> have bonds with others and a shared history, yet seldom travel to each others' worlds. Such travelling would require educators to enter the parents' worlds, to see parents through parents' eyes, to attend to parents' own sense of themselves from within the parents' worlds and to attend to parents' construction of educators

> from within the parents' worlds. Similarly, this travelling would require entry into the educators' worlds by parents. Only as we travel to the other's world can we identify with one another. (p. 13)

Pushor's words call me to travel to the worlds of parents and teachers to hear the stories one parent and one teacher would tell of coming to a school of choice. I want to view this complex landscape from the different vantage points in our circle. As Palmer (1999) asserts, "reality is a web of communal relationships, and we can know reality only by being in community with it" (p. 95).

In this research heard the stories of the experiences of one parent and one teacher who have come to a school of choice. I then metaphorically laid the stories alongside my own, and beside one another, in order to explore the research puzzle surrounding the transition stories of a parent and a teacher at two different schools of choice.

CHAPTER TWO

The Call of Stories: Exploring Experience Narratively

Their story, yours, mine—it's what we all carry with us on this trip we take, and we owe it to each other to respect our stories and learn from them. (Coles. 1989, p. 30)

At the start of each school year, I draw my students together to read a quilt story. "*There once was a quilt maker who kept a house in the blue misty mountains up high. Even the oldest great, great, great grandfather could not recall a time when she was not up there, sewing away day after day.*" And so begins the story of *The Quilt Maker's Gift* (Brumbeau, 2000). This story also marks the beginning of many school years for me, as my students take on the task of creating their own quilt—a class quilt. Their quilt is not composed of fabric, however, but is made of paper, created through collage. This quilt becomes a metaphor for our community, a visual reminder that individually we are all beautiful but together we create a masterpiece.

In addition to the quilt stories serving as our metaphor for our community, these stories also become a means to develop the concept of story beyond those ideas that are bound in a book. In *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt,* Clara's quilt tells the story of how to escape slavery by mapping the *safe* route to Canada. The quilt tells a hidden story, one not obvious to "outsiders." Other quilt stories tell of the past: a piece from dad's old shirt, grandma's best dress, a baby blanket, all comfort a pioneer girl as she makes the lonely journey to her new homestead. These stories allow me to broaden the children's

understanding of story and lead to a class brainstorm of all the ways stories can be represented. Initially, our list includes photographs, paintings, sculpture, books. Gradually, though, the students' awareness of identifying stories grows to include rocks, fossils, artefacts, antiquities, old buildings, animal tracks, even trees. Eventually, the students can identify people who look for stories, like archaeologists, geologists, detectives, lawyers, teachers, palaeontologists, researchers, journalists, artists, and so on. And the students too become story investigators and begin to look for stories everywhere.

Later, we take a walk around the community investigating the story of the community that surrounds our school. Can we find evidence of change in this community? What do the buildings and homes tell about the area's unfolding story? Students take pictures of buildings or things that they feel tell an important story and try to imagine the changes the structures have seen, as in the book *The Little House* (Burton, 1942).

The central idea of story becomes the lens through which we view all our learning. While studying rocks and minerals we look at how geologists and palaeontologists might tell the story of the earth from a simple rock. We are enthralled with the stories cultures tell through their ancient structures and art, all sculpted of, and on, stone—the pyramids, Machu Piccu, the cave paintings of Lascaux, Pompeii, and so many others. Each new unit allows us a different way to view stories and their unique context.

Story allows the children and me a lens through which we understand and interpret our worlds. With exposure to many different stories the students grow to understand that one story can shed light on a time or a place and many stories together can offer a broader perspective. Perhaps then, it is to be expected that my desire to tell and explore the notion of story led me to narrative inquiry.

> Experiences taken collectively are temporal. We are therefore not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced on a continuum - peoples' lives, institutional lives, lives of things. ...the people, schools, and educational landscapes we study undergo day-by-day experiences that are contextualized within a longer term historical narrative. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19)

If you imagine a tiny dot in the centre of a very large circle—that is the way I imagine my story. If you zoom in closely that tiny dot becomes a little circle and fills your field of vision. And you think to yourself, that is all. That is the story. But what needs to be asked is: Who made that little circle? With what was it created? How did it come to be positioned just so, in the centre of this larger circle? What was there before it? And yes, what will come after? And perhaps these questions cause you to take a step backward, quite overwhelmed by this little dot. It is then that you might realize that the larger circle is made up of many more of these little dots; stories of others, in the centre of their own circle, but placed at different vantage points around my circle when it is I who is doing the telling.

This represents for me my experience in trying to tell my story of transition to a school of choice. It began in a very small circle of understanding constructed from my experiences of beginning at an alternative school. That dot became more detailed as I began to explore who I was in relation to the story I was telling and how my past experiences were shaping my living of this story. All the while, I was surrounded by a more familiar story, or so I thought—that of the larger school landscape with all the regular participants in their places: parents, other teachers, the mandated curriculum and so on. What I have discovered, however, is that by stepping back and viewing this landscape of schools from the other positions in the circle and by piecing together our collective perspectives, the landscape that surrounds us is not all that simple after all. The larger circle I described for you is not simply a line made up of other little dots, but is significantly shaped by the white space in between the two circles. That white space is also filled with an endless capacity for different stories and perspectives that are changed each time I look in or out of the circle. I call them the "white space" stories. These are the stories that are often hidden, disguised, or too sacred for anyone to look at closely.

The Methodology

This circle metaphor has helped me to understand the storied landscape of schools but it is narrative inquiry that has allowed me the opportunity to think of my story from these different perspectives and to discover the existence of the white space stories. Within this three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with temporal dimensions,

personal-social dimensions, and within a dimension of place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), I have heard the stories of one parent and one teacher who have moved to a school of choice. I have laid their stories alongside my own; in this way I hope to allow the reader a chance to better understand our experiences of belonging to a school of choice.

I believe the stories of parents and teachers are critical to understanding school life and the complexity of school communities in schools of choice. Through the telling of these stories and attending to the narrative contexts I have gained insight into how schools of choice are being experienced by the parade of players (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

"Our research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 121). My interest has evolved as part of my transition to a new landscape in a school of choice, one where the plotlines did not follow what I had constructed through earlier experiences. I begin therefore, with my own narrative experience and add to it the voices and perspectives of my participants whose stories weave a narrative quilt of their own experiences.

The participants, one who is a parent at a school of choice and the other a teacher at a school of choice, are known to me through past school relationships but are not connected or known to one another. They have shown interest in my study through past conversations and have voluntarily offered their support. Each conversation was audio recorded with the participant's consent. The focus of these conversations was based on their individual experiences of coming to a school of choice. The audio recordings of

conversations became the primary field text of my inquiry. The transcripts of these recordings were analyzed using the method of Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and become the basis for the research texts. Other sources of field text included emails and journals shared for the purpose of this research.

Relational Living: The Ethics of Research

The relationships among participants and myself were of critical importance, for the sharing of stories involves considerable risk and vulnerability, as in the telling of any stories where there is no previously constructed space for that dialogue to occur. Because of this I attempted to create spaces of trust. Stories were usually shared at my home over a meal or snack. As the relationships developed I was invited to the homes of Sonja and Gillian, the participants, as well. I attempted to open my ears "to the voices and perspectives of [these] women so that we [I] might begin to hear the unheard and unimagined" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986)

In order to clearly understand the purpose, process, and methodology of the study, participants were invited to read my proposal for research. Prior to the commencement of the research they were required to sign a consent form and were fully informed as to what this consent implied. Because the participants were engaged in negotiating and constructing their part in the research on an ongoing basis, their involvement and approval in the process extended far beyond this form, however. "Relational issues . . . in narrative inquiry underpin the entire inquiry process . . . collaborative research, . . .

requires a close relationship akin to friendship. Relationships are joined, as McIntyre implies, by the narrative unities of our lives" (Clandinin & Connelly as cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 7). At any point, if the participants were not comfortable with the way in which the study was unfolding and/or with their role in the research, they had the opportunity to discuss the work with me in a meaningful way and also understood that they were permitted to withdraw from the study.

Pseudonyms were used to disguise the names of participants and their schools. At some points transcripts of conversations and quotes made by participants have been altered to remove any identifiable characteristics of their school or situation to ensure anonymity.

Field notes were transcribed by me and will be kept in a secure location for a five year period along with any written documents or tapes pertaining to the research.

Participant-Researchers

The participants in this study are a parent at a school of choice, a teacher at a school of choice, and I. The recorded conversations were held over a five month period, but conversations around the research continued as the writing progressed and was brought back to the participants for their feedback and thoughts. The participants are from schools within one of four large urban boards in Western Canada. The schools are defined in some measure as "schools of choice" but are diverse in the programs that they offer. For the purposes of this study, to be considered a school of choice or alternative school,

the guiding motivation for students and families to attend the school is the unique programming offered there. The participants are known to me through past school relationships but are not connected or known to one another. Both were, at the time of this research, experiencing a transition to a school of choice. The participants have voluntarily offered their support for this study. They are in no way directly involved or influenced by any aspect of my present teaching assignment or position.

The Emergence of Story: Composing Field Texts

Each conversation between me and my co-researchers was audio recorded. The audio recordings of conversations were transcribed and became the primary field text of my inquiry. Other sources of field text included emails, journals, and notes, shared for the purpose of this research.

The transcripts composed in our meetings were shared with the individual participants before subsequent meetings. This allowed participants time to read, reflect and respond to the text. Any comments or reflections I had around our conversations were shared with participants. This reflexivity in the development of field texts allowed the participants to have voice in the construction of understanding and meaning. Hollingsworth (1993) writes: "That approach to restorying educational experience suggests that the researcher-practitioner relationship, in which each party has voice in the retelling, is as important as the data examined for synthesis and restorying" (p. 7).

Meaning Making: Composing the Research Text

The first part of the research text is three distinct narrative accounts: a parent's story of coming to a school of choice, a teacher's story, and my story. Each account reflects the individual experiences of each participant and me as we entered the landscape of a school of choice. These tellings were constructed within the 3-dimensional narrative inquiry space and, as such, included narratives of past and present experiences, personal and social dimensions and connections to place.

> [Narrative] locates itself in the past (whether the real or imagined, fictional past) in order to allow itself forward movement. The present not only competes against the story with vastly superior weight of reality, but limits it to the pace of a watch hand or heartbeat. Only by locating itself in the "other country" of the past is the narrative free to move towards its future, the present. (Le Guin, 1989, p. 38)

The second part of the research text includes the resonances among these three accounts—places where the stories overlap or where the edges of stories rub up against one another. This is the place where the participants and I have a chance to lay our wonders side by side as our narratives move forward.

It is the individual stories of these two participants that I have attended to in order to understand the transition experience of coming to a school of choice both from inside and outside my little circle.

CHAPTER THREE

The Narrator: Stories From My Circle

Narrative inquirers need to reconstruct their own narrative inquiry histories to be alert to possible tension between those narrative histories and the narrative research they undertake. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 46)

Books and stories have always been keystones for me. My most powerful memories of early childhood are of snuggling into bed each night with the anticipation of listening to my mom reading a story to me with her soothing voice. Later, I embarked on my Grade 1 year determined that I was going to read, and eagerly dropped my mom's hand on that first day and marched into my new space—my classroom—determined that it would happen. After listening to the magical tales of Hans Christian Andersen at home, it didn't take long for me to master the "Dick and Jane" readers we were offered at school. Very soon, I was taking home the more sophisticated "Toy Box Surprise" and reading to my mom and, not long after, coaching my friends to read.

The discovery of the school library began the real magic. I began supplementing the static reading choices in my classroom and home with fantastic stories and the wonderful world of the picture book. My first love was *Harold and His Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 1955). How much like me Harold was, but I with pen instead of crayon drawing hour after hour, imagining all sorts of wonderful things and places. I recall the moments my parents would drop me off in the book store as they grocery shopped. I spent my time in that magical space coveting the beautiful picture books. I loved everything about them, the smell, the smooth texture of the paper and the rich and colourful artwork.

Books had begun to transform from those with black and white line drawings on newsprint-like paper of my early childhood, to these masterful representations that wove the story so intimately one didn't need the words. Images of me, sitting at the feet of my teachers, listening to stories that had evolved into complex and captivating narratives that always stopped at just the most exciting part still echo: the purple high heels of one teacher tapping out an imaginary beat as she read, or the licking of his finger tip before another teacher turned each page.

For me, school was a wonderful place to be. It was the place I first felt my talents recognized: the cat I painted that the teacher invited my mom in to see, the praise over learning to read so quickly, and the individual challenges offered to me are memories like little pebbles I held tightly in my hand.

Mrs. Mitchell was my favourite teacher. It's funny because I don't have that many memories of her specifically or of my Grade 2 year, but I suppose as a child I would have summed up my adoration as "she was nice." As a teacher, I can see it was more than that. In fact, the quality that I loved about Mrs. Mitchell was that I felt she "saw" me.

My parents are both perfectionists. Well meaning, they exacted perfection from every task. My dad would simply point out what was wrong, my mom would just do it over herself. Images of my 7-year-old self shovelling an enormous driveway only to hear my dad point out the slice of ice I failed to get off or watching my mom take each strand of tinsel and measure it out evenly along the branches after the family had finished

decorating the Christmas tree remain in my head and as a child, overshadowed the moments that I knew my parents were proud of me.

Mrs. Mitchell changed that somehow, even for them. My mom will still tell of how Mrs. Mitchell said to her that I would go to university some day. She made me feel smart in other ways too. She allowed me to work on my own spelling and language programs and gave free time to me when my work was done. Mostly, she praised me and celebrated my achievements in a way utterly foreign to me. It was her confidence in me that carried me through times when I felt less smart, that I fell back on when I was feeling unseen. It would be hard to measure the precise influence her words had on my life. Beyond the specifics though, she opened, for me, possibility. I may have known in myself that I was pretty clever, but it is not the same to know others believe in it. She gave that to me and possibly helped my parents to expect great things from me too (Written reflections, EDPY 597, Summer 2000).

There was more than the books and the encouragement however. My school was perhaps one of the first alternative schools, a "testing" school for the new philosophies emerging in education. Children in Grades 1, 2, 3, or 4, 5 and 6 shared a classroom with three teachers. Children were grouped by ability and interest, and learning topics revolved around broad themes. Children with special needs were integrated into our class, and we had special teachers for art, music, library, physical education, and science. It was in this setting that my passion for art and learning flourished. It was in this place that I was allowed to explore topics in a way that excited and motivated me but also honoured my

creative side. I could publish my own stories, create immense murals of Egyptian society, or pursue a scientific question in an abstract way.

As a teacher looking back, I marvel at the experience with wonder. How *did* the school provide those specialists? How was the time found each Friday for a sing-a-long that included such non-curricular classics as *Frankie & Johnnie, Rockin' Robin* or *Bobby Magee*? How did those three teachers manage the 60 children scattered over such a large, active space? How lucky I was.

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) state that a "teacher's knowledge is that body of convictions and meanings, conscious or unconscious, that have arisen from experience (intimate, social, and traditional) and that [these] are expressed in a person's practices" (p. 7). My story, my teaching, reflects this idea, as it is the knowledge composed from my childhood experiences that are expressed in my classroom and that create the measure of my success I feel in my own classroom. My experiences as a teacher "are grounded in my lived world, my first landscapes, my 'rememory' " (Greene, 1995, p. 82).

I didn't know how special my elementary school experiences were, however, until I enrolled in a teacher education program and heard my fellow colleagues speak of the "oppressive" nature of their experiences in school. For me, what was being taught at university fit perfectly with my picture of elementary school life. It was there, at university, that my learning became full colour once again, and my recollections reflect the clarity of those moments as my passion for knowing returned. I eagerly pursued a grownup understanding of my childhood experiences and replaced my child lens with a

practitioner lens. In doing this, I also replaced the terminology I used to describe such experiences. "Working together" became "cooperative learning", having "children with physical and mental disabilities in my class" became "integrated setting", "everybody doing their own thing" evolved into "self-directed learning" and so on. It was a relief to return to these beliefs after the six years I had spent in the upper divisions devoid of any but the most traditional of teaching and learning arrangements. In picture book terms my memories of junior high and high school are akin to the black and white trade books—there was story there but no vibrancy.

In my third year at university I enrolled in an alternative practicum program. It was 1989, and jobs in education were scarce. Initially, I saw this program as a way to gain valuable teaching experience and distinguish myself upon graduation. What I discovered was that I was embarking on a whole new way of understanding the teaching experience and my connection to it. It was in this program that I realized I was writing my own story, not just observing my memories. The students in this program and I spent 2½ days each week for the full year in one school, working cooperatively with one teacher and her class. The remaining 2½ days were spent at the university debriefing and reflecting on our experiences.

It was in this program that I began to understand more clearly the complexities of teaching and to define for myself the teaching self I would become. It was also in this setting that I began to experience shared authority reminiscent of my elementary experiences, as our professors allowed the students to move the agenda of our classes and

took the time to respond to our writing and queries genuinely. I was "seen" once again and had the space to explore my narrative history and how it materializes in my beliefs and actions.

My last year of university was a struggle for me as I returned to anonymity and a very top down approach to teaching and learning. I couldn't return to being a passive recipient, though. I had taught for a year in a school and had been given voice through my alternative practicum. I was no longer the "empty vessel" waiting for enlightenment; I very much wanted to share my knowing as well. I was at the point where I had begun "to grow beyond a dependency and trust in external authorities" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 10).

Before the year was out, I was offered a job with a large urban board in a neighbouring city. It was an absolute gift. Jobs were very tight and the stack of applications that covered my kitchen table were proof that I was prepared to teach anywhere.

I was assigned a school that was a perfect fit for all that I believed about teaching and learning. Like my own memories of elementary school, I believed it was a magical place for children and teachers alike. All the current philosophies of learning I had experienced in university were in place here, and I felt my knowing to be very much valued and honoured. At the same time, the staff was generous with their mentorship. I was encouraged to learn more, to try different things to enhance my programming, to check out what other teachers were doing, and to present what I did in my classroom.

And, in spite of this all of this, looking back, I realize I was ill prepared to teach in many ways. Yet, some of the most beautiful of teaching memories come from this period, precisely because it was so uncomplicated. My reflections from a university class illustrate this tension.

My story as a beginning teacher was different than most I think...

I entered a landscape that, to me, felt filled with possibility. Everything that I had learned in school and desired to use in my practice was being modelled at that school. The principal was innovative, dynamic, and worked hard to find a place of value and recognition for each of her staff members. I recall feeling so enthusiastic and determined that each of my students would know they were cared for and respected. I was going to be that person in their life that they would look back on and feel inspired or reassured. That person we all need to have—the kind that believed in you.

My memories of that first year reflect this focus. They are about a connectedness with my students—writing poetry on the hill together, creating a bat cave in the classroom and a beach in the library, doing the conga to Mexican music, and writing a blizzard of wee notes celebrating their successes.

I don't think I taught very much else well that year. Certainly not spelling or phonics, or self editing (too hard on their self esteem); not much "real" science either. But I did teach a curriculum rich in storytelling

and self discovery. I still recall the huge pile of unmarked work I pitched at the end of the year and the voluminous stories I sent home unedited. I didn't feel then that any of that was important. I had reached them. Percentage wise, those students, more than another group, continued to stay in touch. They volunteered in my class, wrote me letters when I was overseas, and still beam when I run into them. They tell me of the notes they saved and the fun they had.

It is a bit strange, but that is the teacher I continue to strive to be. I mean, I shudder when I think of all the things I didn't teach that year. I can confidently say I am a pretty good teacher now. I do teach science and language arts overtly and foster a love for all kinds of learning. I also assess students and plan for individual learning and behavioural needs. I am involved in many leadership activities and feel valued by my parents and students. But I struggle in a whole other way. I struggle with making the time for little notes of recognition. I struggle with allowing for spontaneous non-curricular moments. I struggle to try to maintain my focus on the child who is at the receiving end of my well-practiced responses and management skills.

Those moments from my first year live in my practice each and every day. They allowed me to know that there is so much more to a good teacher than just teaching skill. They also taunt me, as our school system seems to move further and further from the values they imbue and as I

struggle to continue to find space and time for the genuine connectedness that is required of me. (Written reflections on learning to teach, September, 2002)

This philosophical struggle was what ultimately led me to explore the idea of teaching overseas.

I had taken my leave and started my adventure for all kinds of wonderful reasons. In some ways, though, I know I fled. I fled from the cutbacks, from the low morale, from the bitterness, the turning away from thinking of children and instead thinking of assessment and grades and ... money. I fled because I couldn't stand to watch this happen to something I believed so passionately in.

On my return, it was relief. Things had calmed somewhat and I had escaped the witnessing of the changes. They were in place. There was new curriculum, new reports, and lots of warnings about how hard this or that was. Somehow, though, it was easier to accept, like returning to a country after the battle had been fought and lost instead of witnessing the war. (Written reflections, January 2001)

The parents of my students are largely on the periphery of these memories, they were in that outside circle, a part of, but not central to my experiences. I try to create spaces for the students' classroom experiences and the parents' experiences to intersect. At the beginning of each year I write a letter inviting parents to write to me about their child telling me about their strengths, character, worries, wonders, or hopes. I do this as a

means to share their knowing about their child. I maintain an open classroom where parents are able to "pop in" when they have a chance to visit with their child. I offer child-centred conferences and evenings and afternoons to celebrate the culmination of a unit or a special occasion. I have enjoyed Christmas dinners in the library, family sleigh rides on weekends, concerts, cafes, and recitals. I have always been lucky enough to have an active community of parent volunteers who were engaged in a variety of ways in the classroom and who routinely volunteered to share information, resources, or talents.

In my mind's eye I can recall many faces and recollect the variety of ways that parents have participated in my class. I can even tell you some special stories that they shared with me. These individuals came into our centre circle. The students, I and they benefited from the experience. Yet, I know little about how parents experienced the school landscape outside their experiences in my classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Meeting of Stories: Parents and Teachers in Schools

The widest circle of movement and awareness is global, when finally the circles are made one. (Bateson, 2000, p. 245)

September, 1998

Dear Parents,

Welcome back to a brand new year of school!

To help me in getting to know the needs of your child as quickly as possible and your hopes and expectations for this year, I wonder if you would take the time to write me a short note. Any bit of information about your child will help me in planning a program which will be tailored to meet his/her individual needs.

I look forward to working with your child and you to help create a stimulating year of learning.

Sincerely,

Michelle (Letter sent to parents , September 1998)

Hi Michelle!

Do you have time to go for a coffee (or meet at school if you prefer) one day after school? I'm free any day but Tuesdays. I thought I could share my perspectives on Cohen (rather than writing you a note) and you could give me an overview of your program. (I also thought it's a good reason to have a latte!!)

Actually, I thought it would be a good chance to get to know one another better as well. Let me know what you think and when you're available.

Thanks!

Deb (Card received from parent, September 1998)

Before I'd even met Debbie I knew of her. In two ways really. First, there was the smiling, bubbly parent I'd see regularly delivering home-baked muffins, cookies, and Tim Bits to her child's class, and then there was the **Parent** teachers referred to with caution. The former principal, consultant, PAA president and very involved mom with high standards and a decidedly child-centred philosophy. Her very presence seemed to intimidate. There were lots of stories too, ways in which she had tried to change the general direction of our school by pushing for a school philosophy, by involving parents in class selection, and by challenging those decisions that were made without parental input.

When the class lists were made and Cohen was placed with me, more stories came, and I was "warned" in a number of subtle ways of how hard it was to have Debbie Pushor in your class. It was with all of this in mind that I received Debbie's note inviting me for coffee.

I don't know how long we talked about my program that afternoon. It seems we covered a million things including both of our stints overseas,

our beliefs, our concerns and a whole lot of sharing of our stories and experiences in schools. Debbie talked about her research and shared with me the hope that maybe we could in some way work together this year. I left excited and charged with new possibilities and the relief of finally finding someone who believed as I did that something was going awry with education. Later that night, I lay in bed feeling worried. I had crossed all kinds of professional boundaries. Yes, she was a teacher also, that did change our relationship, but she was also a parent. I had just opened up my class for her evaluation and participation, and **THAT** was intimidating.

We met every week or so after that. I think our initial discussions centred around the Grade 3 building unit. Debbie talked about building a log cabin in the loft in my classroom. Again, initially I was excited, and later panicked. I could see that this would be a great way for parents to become involved and for some to show their very specialized skills, and it would be an exciting tie to our pioneer and building units. But really truly how much would the children get out of it compared with the amount of time to be invested? This was my first crack at Grade 3 and the provincial exams could not be forgotten. There were issues of the ways in which some parents interacted with children, doing it rather than teaching it. There was the issue of noise, space and the whole consuming aspect of it, which would make it impossible for some children to concentrate on

anything else, while others were building. I felt very torn wanting very much to try this, but being very tied to these realities.

During these practical discussions we would digress to philosophical conversations. I had read Debbie's paper and could see much value and truth in what she had written. Some points, however, sat less comfortably for me. First, there was the idea that traditional roles of volunteering were demeaning and not valuable. Tied to that there was the issue of "serving the school's agenda." How could we not serve the school's agenda? Wasn't this why we were all at a **school**? While I couldn't deny the possibilities for parent engagement in a way that fulfilled their agenda, I couldn't operate my program to the same extent without the assistance of my volunteers to laminate, photocopy, help on field trips and do other teacher-directed activities. The curriculum has become so demanding it was difficult if not impossible to get through it as is, never mind with the added expectations that parents would drive some of what happened. It was overwhelming. I was laden with guilt. Whenever parents came in and asked what they could do to help, I looked at them suspiciously and asked what would you like to do? I felt awful when I had to work through recess and couldn't spend time with my parent volunteer to ease the awkwardness of this time, or to join them in coffee. My pile of to do's was growing. Awareness may be power, but it wasn't working in my classroom.

> Debbie and I began to question just how much the community itself would dictate the levels and kinds of parent involvement in a school.
>
> I believe that it was at this point that Debbie introduced me to Venetta Goodall (1997) and began to discuss the idea of involving parents in the curriculum. This seemed, to me, to be the possible answer that would fulfill all of our roles and expectations. It would directly benefit the children, it would engage and involve parents on levels that were largely closed to them in the past, and still it would fulfill my mandate of covering curriculum. But what would this look like? (Personal reflections, 1999)

It was this meeting that began for me a transformation in my thinking about parents. Prior to having Debbie's child in my class, I had been thoughtful about parents, open by many standards, but never had I really given thought to the kind of engagement a parent had in my room. There was no space for thinking and giving validation to a parent's perspective on the school landscape—and lots of fear about what would happen if we, as the staff of a school, did. The experience of teaching in the Philippines had been the first time these "borders" between parents and teachers had been tested for me.

> In schools, these borders, these places on the landscape, are made institutionally, and respected by the individuals who live their stories out within the institutions. Indeed, for most individuals, they are so taken for granted, so embodied in one's sense of living on the landscape, that they are not noticed. It is only when someone is new to the landscape or when something has changed about the

> landscape that we awaken to the borders. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999, p. 103–104)

I first rubbed up against this different way of viewing parents at a staff social—that is I had *assumed* it was a staff social—for my new school in Makati, Philippines. However, what I soon discovered was that in this space, being part of an "expat" community took precedence over traditional boundaries held between parents and teachers, where parents' and teachers' lives outside the school landscape were kept separate. Here, the parents and teachers mixed fluidly in and out of school, their lives intersected on vacations, outings, grocery shopping, gatherings, and socials. Indeed, it was during this time that I became aware of a different way of thinking about relationships between teachers and parents, a way in which it was acceptable (and the professional world would not upend itself) if one held non-professional relationships with the families of the children being taught. In some ways, I was more receptive and less fearful of a meeting with Debbie because of this experience. However, I still had a niggling feeling that crossing into this territory was forbidden.

Silences in the Literature

The need to remain separate is well represented in the literature about parents and parental engagement in schools. While there are books on this topic (Alberta Teachers' Association, 1996; Barth, 1990; Epstein et al., 2002; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991; Kyle et al., 2002; Langston, 1990; Minter, 1995; Pushor, 2001), very few actually include the

perspectives of parents *and* teachers in the same pages. Pushor describes the reasons parents' perspectives are often not honoured in schools. She writes that while the story of school is a co-construction, parents are not considered to hold valid knowledge:

> The sacred stories of schooling—educational professionals are the only holders of knowledge, education decisions rest rightfully in the hands of educators, schools are places for enrolled children not their parents and siblings—are co-constructed. They are lived out by educators who wear their expert knowledge as a badge and who exclude parents from participation in decision making. (p. 263–264)

With the advent of schools of choice, parents are finding themselves in the position of challenging and voicing what they believe their children should experience in school through the power of choice. Their support of particular programs give strong voice to their needs and expectations for schools, as does their rejection of other programs. Teachers too, now have the choice of finding a school that reflects their personal beliefs about teaching and learning.

CHAPTER FIVE

Participants in the Parade

The silent star seems pleased, quietly thrilled, to talk of his work with someone who understands so well. He laughs and sighs and even trembles slightly, reliving it all. (Rylant, 1995, p. 35)

Joining the Parade: My Story of Transition

When I look back I realize that the story of transition I experienced when I began at a school of choice was not unforeseen by the people who hired me. I recall the principal asking me during my interview if I thought I could handle being in such a large school, where, for instance, I might only see him on occasion. I was confident I would be fine, I told him. I had taught at a K–12 school in the Philippines where there were over 2000 students. I was taking on a familiar grade and there wouldn't be the cultural adjustments that I had experienced overseas; even the school philosophies had strong parallels between them. In hindsight, I can see I was blindsided by what I did experience. My first reflections illustrate the expectations and hopes I had for my new landscape and then the slow realization that a different story was emerging.

One such story stays fresh in my mind. It is the story of my beginning at this school of choice. Parts of this story live in other stories I or others might tell you about our school. It speaks of the complex dynamics, and at times the conflicting expectations at play at our school. It speaks of finding and creating place, of a community that struggles to define itself and a landscape that, at times, is difficult to navigate.

> I met the staff at the end of spring—I was pumped and full of enthusiasm for what would become my new school in the fall. Reluctantly, I was led to "my classroom." Many apologies and forewarnings came my way before the door was even open - "it had been a storage room, the window's been broken for years so it's a little dirty, it's really very small, you may want to buy curtains, it will get hot..."
>
> I entered the room and saw that it was all true. It was small, filthy, and uninviting. I wasn't daunted, though. I had been told about this by the administration and promised money to furnish my classroom— indeed I'd already selected and ordered the pieces. I had been promised that the room would be painted and repaired and new blinds would be purchased. I had been told they'd also purchase a carpet to put in the nearby sun room so I could do some activities there when we needed to spread out. (Narrative reflection, Winter 2000)

When I think back to when the job was offered at this school of choice, I see myself so hopeful and excited, sure that this was the school that represented what I believed about teaching and learning. There was an enthusiastic staff who raved about their children and their space and who were keen to learn and try new things. I couldn't wait. I was weary of being one of the lone defenders of trying new things or planning exciting activities for the kids.

My old school had changed over time. Seemingly sucked dry of its enthusiasm, the school morale had been replaced with something closer to anger. As the political

situation in the province continued to play out, the teachers there had become more and more disgruntled, resenting the very idea of effort beyond their classroom. It was hard watching the change of this landscape. My reflections on my new school continue to highlight the perceived contrasts between these two schools.

> I recall the drive back to my school and the excitement I felt as I told my colleagues all the details: my new school had a child-centred philosophy which reflected so many of the learning practices I was passionate about—the teachers were strong, dynamic, and POSITIVE—ready and excited about team planning and collaboration—they liked what I believed about learning and children and were excited about what I could offer their school. The staff room reflected a place that respected its teachers. It had a long eating table, a fridge with water and ice, a dishwasher, new comfortable furniture to lounge in, and white china cups! Best of all, my classroom would have a its own TV/VCR, computer, and PHONE!!! (Narrative reflection, Winter 2000)

On August 27, just days before the school opened for the year, I found myself in the office talking to my new administrator. I explained to her that nothing had been done. There was patching on the walls but no paint. The old blinds were hanging in ripped threads, the new bulletin boards were leaning against the walls, and it was still filthy. I told her that the custodian assigned to my room would be back Friday (the weekend before school opened) from holidays, and I had been told by the head custodian that he was too busy to help. I couldn't have the ladder as there was a long line of people who

wanted it ahead of me. And so, I had spent the morning washing the walls and scrubbing off the layers of dirt that kept rolling down. I had pried open a locked cabinet and cleared it of contents last created when there were ditto machines. I was filthy and tired and I was looking for some help.

The practiced response of my administrator was to assure me that I should be worrying about my planning and getting my photocopying in. Everything will get done. I took a big breath and explained that all my things were still in boxes. I didn't have a file cabinet so couldn't unpack anything to even begin to find what I needed. The desk in the room was filthy and I didn't have a chair. I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE ANY CHILDREN'S DESKS.

When I think back to this moment I can see that the stress I was experiencing was a reaction to more than the unpreparedness of my new school to furnish my classroom. Compounded with that reality was the unspoken reality that I was the new teacher added to what was formally a grade team of one. The other teacher had a spacious and beautifully decorated (and furnished) classroom. As I was washing the walls in my classroom she was preparing beaufiful little name tags for each of her student's desks. As I was searching the halls for any useable scrap of furniture she was hanging a beautiful welcome display outside her door. On this landscape I was unknown quantity to the teachers, the students, and the parents. I may have been hired for skills and talents as a teacher, but it was up to me to prove to everyone that I was every bit as good as I had presented myself to be. I think it was at that moment that I felt most alone in this and

began attending to the covert comments by other teachers that the promises wouldn't happen, that attention in this school was focused elsewhere. I think it was then, in tears, that I decided to paint the room myself. As I shared my decision with another staff member and wondered aloud who needed to be asked about this, one staff member said quietly: "At this school, it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission."

> It's the middle of September. I sit at my ancient desk and survey my classroom. The room has now been cleaned up, complete with paint, Mac tack, and useable pieces of furniture I spent hours scrounging for—I chuckle to myself as I realize that the only contribution my school has made to the renovation of my room thus far is a phone. It still lacks a computer, computer table, TV, VCR, sound system, desk chair, and book shelves: all of which are standard in the other classrooms.
>
> Funniest of all, the elegant staff room I had been so impressed by during my interview didn't exist for teachers at all. It was an administrative conference room. The room we huddled in each lunch hour had no fridge, sink, or furniture to speak of and looked more like someone's garage before a weekend sale—filled with the discarded remnants of teaching lives past (Narrative reflection, Winter 2000).

An email to a friend indicates this slow change in perception and a need to connect with my former colleagues.

> **-----Original Message-----**

September 28, 2000 9:15 PM

>... it has been a difficult change in all the ways you wouldn't expect necessarily. My >room wasn't ready >at all and I ended up spending the entire week before school >scrounging furniture, cleaning and painting it. Because the Elem is new, they are really low on resources too, so it's back to going to the public library >to supplement! But the staff is so wonderful. Enthusiastic and excited and very very strong. This weekend I finally felt in control enough to relax and socialize. My 'old school' group got together on Friday. We had a great time...

This is one story that I can tell you of coming to a school of choice. There are many others: some more positive that speak to the reasons I continue to stay at this school, and many that show the complexities of living in this unique school context. Over time, my reflections and focus shifted from the physical landscape to other dimensions of the school landscape. These were the more subtle aspects of the school, and the threads were harder to follow: the history, the power structure, the personalities, and the cover stories. The following email I sent to a friend at another school expresses the connection I had made with my past experiences of adjusting to another culture.

-----Original Message-----

Date: November 6, 2000 5:51 PM

Subject: Re: Fw:

Hi Bon!

>I've just been really busy. The new school I'm at is quite wonderful and very >much like an international school, (in fact I teach IB) but there is endless work >and meetings. most days I love it, but right now in the middle of reports, it feels >pretty overwhelming. It's been interesting actually, because I've seen so many of signs of culture shock among the new staff (and me)! It's just about that stated agenda and then slowly discovering the hidden ones. It can be a challenge to navigate through. Not unlike living somewhere else....

Culture shock is defined as "a cultural disorientation... People in the new culture not only speak a different language, they also live by a different set of rules, with different values, attitudes and behaviors. In some cases these differences are immediately obvious; in others they are quite subtle. Cultural disorientation results in a range of emotional reaction, from irritation and frustration to anxiety and insecurity to resentment and anger. If the cultural adaptation process is not well managed, it will lead to depression." (Terra Cognita, 1999, ¶1).

Beginning in a new school is for me much the same as entering a new culture. I was an outsider entering a place of many stories, some lived, some believed, and many, many hidden. Within those stories I struggled trying to find place and acceptance and understanding so that I could successfully negotiate my way. I was also made more aware of my own story as it, in the form of expectation, at times clashed ominously with what I was experiencing. Clandinin (2000) says, "we see ourselves in the midst in another sense as well; that is, we see ourselves as in the middle of a nested set of stories—ours and theirs" (p. 63).

When I had first arrived in the Philippines I attended an orientation for all new staff. During this orientation I was first introduced to the notion of culture shock. I was given a diagram of what I could anticipate experiencing emotionally as I settled into, and adjusted to, this new culture. One of the cautions, I recall being told, was not to be deceived by the seeming familiarity of the Philippine culture. It was true, the Philippine people were fluent speakers of English, the city streets were lined with every American chain restaurant you could imagine, there were large upscale shopping centres, clothing boutiques and clubs; but underneath this familiar veneer was a culture that was distinctly different from my own. It wasn't, however, until I accidentally rubbed up against these places that I realized that there was a different set of cultural assumptions at play and began to define for myself what those were.

There was no such orientation to my alternative school. As I did not move to a new city or even a new school system, I did not anticipate the underlying differences in the landscape that I experienced. It seemed just like any other school in the ways that counted. Indeed, my initial reflections show the expectation that it was all of that but ***better***. Just as my perception of familiarity when I went to the Philippines was based largely on the physical surroundings or appearance of the place, so too were my first impressions of my new school.

However, the stories I had been told before I began at the alternative school didn't fit with my lived reality and I wondered at first what was at play, and was it just me? If I had been designing a quilt I would have been left scavenging for the scraps of fabric with

nary an idea as to how I was supposed to proceed. I felt like Sweet Clara trying to figure out the lay of the land but only being given one small bit of information at a time. Finding other new staff experiencing the same sense of confusion gave me strength to explore and confront the tensions in my experiences as I slowly became aware of the "three-dimensional space" that this was occurring in.

There was no clear way for me to delineate between the past stories, hidden stories, cover stories, lived stories, or even my story. These were the invisible threads I had to work with. The others on the landscape had survivor stories too. They had to fight for each new resource and for the tiniest space for voice in this school landscape dominated by other programming.

My understanding grew, but these threads continually worked together like a tangled ball of string—impossible to tell where one began and another ended. This was the multilayered complexity under which the new teachers, parents, and I negotiated our way and tried to make meaning of our new world. It took some time before I came to understand the narrative history of the building, the teachers, and the students (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988).

The experience of my transition that year is not one I will soon forget. At the time I was experiencing my own transition I was also trying desperately to make the way smoother for my students, about 50% of whom were also new to our school. When I look back on that year, and those stories, I am very aware of the stories I am not telling—the stories of those families who were also new to my school. I sensed their struggle to figure

out the structure of this new place and my resulting ineptness to make things any clearer for them. I am achingly aware that I was unable to really know their story that year or help them in any significant way through it. Yet, they were my advocates. It was their voices and determination to make curtains for my classroom that finally spurred the school to buy blinds. It was their constant support of my teaching that kept me from feeling utterly lost and centred me within my classroom.

I wonder what stories parents would tell of making that decision, of settling in and living in a school of choice. I wonder what they know of my coming to this school of choice. And, I wonder if the edges of their stories overlap with the edges of my own.

Joining the Parade: Sonja's Story of Transition

I don't remember the first time I met Sonja. Although I am sure she introduced herself in the first week of school, along with the other parents eager to meet their child's Grade 3 teacher. My memories of her in my classroom, though, are vivid and well formed. Sonja was the kind of parent volunteer who came in, willing to do anything, and did an exceptional job of everything. It didn't matter if I asked her to laminate or to work with a student, she was always positive and confident and seemed to just enjoy being at school with her daughter Hailey. If I was busy, or if she had finished all there was to do, she would tuck herself comfortably beside a student at their desk or on the floor in the story corner and hang out. I loved that she could do this without changing the rhythm of

our classroom or feeling awkward about being there. She was a parent that I felt could come in and out of our circle with ease.

Sonja's story of coming to a school of choice reflects her character and the strong beliefs she has about honouring the individual gifts of her children. In reality, her story could be told as three separate stories, for it was for different reasons that Sonja sent each of her three children, Mallory, Hailey, and Mackenzie, to an alternative school. Sonja's story represents a struggle between meeting the needs of her children and honouring her own beliefs about schools and communities.

In our first taped conversation, Sonja revisited her reasoning for choosing a school of choice for Hailey, her middle child, and the first to attend a school other than the community school.

> **Sonja:** *I was telling you earlier, I think we just stuck Hailey in—she fit the profile. I was thinking about it later though and realized it wasn't really that. Part of it was, we really, really, felt like she was different. In the school she was at she was top of the class, she was loud, she was obnoxious, she pushed the limits, she craved attention. We didn't want her stifled and boxed in and made to be like everyone else. We wanted her to be in a place where she was appreciated and welcomed for who she was and allowed to be that individual. Because I think that's a lot of it. My sister was a Hailey, but she was so... She was stifled. "Don't be like that. Why can't you listen? Why can't you be different?" And we didn't want that for Hailey. And one of the things the alternative school talked about*

> *was accepting the personalities and allowing individuality. We wanted her to be who she was. So a lot of that thought went into it, as well as, she is academic, she is creative. I remember so often, in kindergarten, she still is to this day not the quiet one, the teacher telling her, "I know you know the answer, but don't say it." And I thought wow. So that's why we thought we'd try it.* (Recorded conversation, November 17, 2003)

Sonja's decision to move Hailey from her community school to an alternative school was based on the feeling that Hailey didn't fit in at her local school and would be better served by a program that Sonja and her husband felt was specifically geared to more academic and creative students like Hailey.

The decision to move her first child, Mallory, from the community school was not as easy for Sonja and her family. This time her motivation for such a change was different. Sonja felt frustrated and defeated by the attitude of her community school toward Mallory's special learning needs and felt that leaving was the only option. "I mean I have always been a community type of person. I wanted my kids to go to a community school. I believe in shopping at the community Safeway. I do like that. But I felt let down by my community school. I didn't really have any reason to stay" (Recorded conversation, November 17, 2003).

Mallory had attended four different schools by Grade 6, and Sonja was becoming familiar with the terrain of trying to access the appropriate services to meet her daughter's learning needs. Like all of Sonja's children, Mallory had begun her schooling in her

community school. In Grade 1 Mallory's teacher noted Mallory was struggling to keep up, but the teacher felt unable to offer any support or testing because of budget concerns. At that point Sonja and her husband decided to have Mallory tested privately. During our conversation, Sonja expressed her disappointment at the lack of support she received from the school when she felt she really needed it, particularly after having supported and contributed so much to her school through fund raising and volunteer work. To use Pushor's (2001) metaphor, Sonja had been invited into "the secret garden" and felt that she had a meaningful place in that school community. However, her participation was welcome only to the extent that she was serving the school's agenda. When she brought her concerns about her child to the school, she was given no voice in the decision making. She felt her knowing of her child and her needs were not valued. Pushor explains the secret garden in this way:

> I think about how teachers, with professional knowledge are positioned inside the walls of the secret garden of curriculum. I think about how parents, with parent knowledge, are positioned outside the walls of the curriculum garden, asked to provide clerical assistance at school or at home, to work in the library or the publishing centre, to supervise in the computer lab . . . Through a lens that focuses on trends and tendencies, we see parents positioned to do the tasks educators deem important, not to be "co-educators" of children. (p. 226)

Sonja was not willing to wait until her child's progress became so disparate from grade level standards that she would qualify for the required assessment and assistance.

She and her husband began to pay for a tutor to work with Mallory and independently they pursued the options that were available. In Grade 2 Mallory was placed in a special needs school where she remained for the next two years.

Sonja: *I was so disgruntled. I went from loving the institution of school and feeling like community schools are so great and we should support them... I looked down my nose at parents who sent their kids to alternative schools. I thought why would we do that? If we don't support our communities then we won't have these community schools. And I went to community schools and I was fine. I didn't get it.*

I guess I felt the school let me down when there was a crisis. And then I went to Underwood, a special needs school, which is called a school of choice, but shouldn't be. People who go there don't have a choice. Mallory had to go.

Purposely, I didn't get involved in the school. I went on the odd field trip. And I had to pay $2,500 a year. We paid $500 up front for the administration cost and then $200 month after that. And we just paid it that way. They said Mallory should be at a site... Before this I sat at the table with Mallory every day. She would cry. I would cry. Trying to do her homework. It was in Underwood where they said I am the teacher and I will teach your child. If she comes home at night and doesn't understand what to do then I haven't taught her enough and you need to send it back. And that's what I do now. I do not do my kids' homework or help

them with it anymore. That sounds so mean, but I think we got burnout after a year of sitting there. (Recorded conversation, November 17, 2003)

Mackenzie, Sonja's third child, joined her sisters at the alternative school four years after Hailey first began there. For Sonja each transition has been significant, each decision based on the individual needs of her children.

Looking In...

Sonja herself attended her community school. She laughs when she thinks about her mom sending her anywhere else. It was convenient and at the time, she thinks that was the only consideration when selecting a school. The idea of researching a school and selecting one based on the teaching or philosophy was not an option.

Sonja's experiences as a parent are vastly different from those of parents when Sonja was a child. Instead of the automatic assumption that one would send their children to the community school, she finds instead that few of the families in her neighbourhood choose to send their children to the school designated by proximity. "They go to Catholic school, the ballet school, the arts school, the French school, the University school..." (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2003). When her children did attend the community school, Sonja found that the children didn't necessarily come from that community, as many were bussed in. Sonja's frustration at how difficult it is to help her children meet other kids in her own neighbourhood is central to her conflicting feelings about alternative schools. To remedy the lack of significant connection to their

community Sonja has tried enrolling her children in community sports teams but once again found that the membership to the community team did not mean residence in the community. "When most of the parents in the community have their children on a soccer team, in Little League, or ballet there are no playmates left for the child who does not participate" (Elkind, 2001, p. 31).

> **Sonja:** *I wonder, I had a really hard childhood—and I was the oldest so I had a lot of responsibilities put on my shoulders . . . . So I've always been very conscious and aware of allowing my children to be children for as long as possible and making them responsible too. I don't baby them and yet they don't need to worry about having food or money. I've tried to take on the parenting responsibilities and let them be kids. So many kids now aren't allowed to be kids. And they are just given [everything]. (Recorded conversation, December 19, 2003).*

I find myself thinking about my own childhood. I had attended an "alternative school" but Sonja was right, it wasn't a choice. It was just the closest school to my home. The same was true for all the children in my neighbourhood but one, who attended Catholic school. I played with those children in gangs through my neighbourhood. As I navigated my bike through that neighbourhood I was comforted by the fact that I could locate the homes of my friends and classmates and could hook up with a buddy without effort to play a game of hide and seek or street hockey. I didn't need to be invited into those games—being a child of that neighbourhood gave me instant access.

Sonja wonders at how her, and others', decisions to pull their children from the neighbourhood school has changed her community. "They don't play like we did in the neighbourhood. It's not because the kids don't go outside, it's because none of the kids go to the same school. And it's kind of sad, but I contributed to this too" (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2003).

Looking Out...

I wonder how many other parents feel that for them a school of choice wasn't their first choice? I wonder how many parents are attending schools of choice not because they were lured away by programming, but because they too, felt let down by the ability of their community school to meet the needs of their child? I marvel at Sonja's strength to make these decisions in the best interests of her children when she so clearly desires the situation to be different.

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and boxed in
and made to be
like everyone else.
We wanted her to be in a place
where she was appreciated
and welcomed for who she was
and let her be that individual.

I have always been a community type of person.
I wanted my kids to go to a community school.
I believe in shopping at the community Safeway,
I do like that. But
I felt let down
by the community schools.
I didn't really feel any reason to stay.

We paid for all the testing to be done privately

I was so disgruntled.
I went from loving the institution of school
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I looked down my nose at parents who sent their kids to alternative schools.
I thought, why would we do that?
If we don't support our communities then we won't have these community schools.
I didn't get it.
I guess I felt the community school let me down when there was a crisis.

Before, I sat at the table with her
To do homework
And she would cry
I would cry.

I sent her because of the creative teaching.
The teachers are always expanding
on an idea...
The community school she was in
wasn't like that at all.
It was extremely
rigid.
I'm the teacher,
you're the student.
You're listening to me.
Small community school.
So there was nowhere else to go.
There was no alternative.

None of those decisions were made lightly.

Discovering the Plotlines

For Sonja, the tensions she felt about school placement did not disappear once her children were placed at a school of choice. She openly wondered if she would place her

children at the alternative school if she were now a prospective parent who was looking for a different school. She talks about how the feel of the school has changed as the program became more widely known and the school population grew.

> **Sonja:** *I think I had my blinders on (laughter). When I was sending Hailey there I did go and visit the school and it seemed very charming. The artwork was up and there were so few classes. It felt very boundaried. It felt small and friendly. I really liked the atmosphere. To be honest if I didn't already have children in that school, and I was a prospective parent visiting the school now, I might be scared off. And that's honest. I think it looks different now than it did. But I'm comfortable with it because we've been there for a while. I'd be scared to put my kids in there now though. Does that make sense? (Recorded conversation, November 17, 2003)*

Over the months that Sonja and I met together conversations often centred on this sense that the school had changed over time. Sonja openly shared her frustration about the noisy halls, lack of parking for parents, and supervision concerns. "Actually I've talked to other parents, and they feel the same way, generally speaking. The word that keeps coming out is chaotic. They talk about it being chaotic and chaos. Parents who live in the neighbourhood who brought their children last year are just saying it is so, so chaotic. One parent whose child is in Grade 7 is saying her child is coming home stressed. Because she's rushed from here to there in this huge throng of students and she's having

anxiety attacks. The population has exploded it is so big and chaotic" (Recorded Conversation, November 17, 2003).

When I asked Sonja why she has kept her Hailey at this alternative school in light of her worries, and why she enrolled both Mallory and Mackenzie at the school since then, her response was laughter. Similar to the tensions in my story of transitioning to a school of choice, Sonja recognized that sometimes her feelings seem conflicted.

> **Sonja:** *Well, for Mallory it was, I guess it does go back to meeting the needs of the individual child. I mean if you have a child with special needs, like for Mallory it's really important that she's taught in a way that she can be successful. For her, it's another way of getting that information in, in an abstract way that she doesn't even know she's learning and applying what she read. That really appeals to me. So that was really what went into placing her there. The creative teaching. The teachers are always expanding on an idea. You start teaching this way, and then there's a fork in the road and it's like "oh ya, let's explore that." Not that you deviate from your teaching. And what the kids say, has impact. The class that Mallory was in wasn't like that at all. It was extremely rigid. I'm the teacher, you're the student. You're listening to me. Small community school. So there was nowhere else to go. There was no alternative. (Recorded conversation, November 17, 2005)*

Emerging Stories From the Larger Circle

Sonja is pleased that she found a place that served the needs of her children in spite of her dismay that they were removed from their community. This tension between her beliefs and her actions continued through our conversations but Sonja was also becoming awake to another story - the story of how others perceive her decision to go to an alternative school. She feels that "Most people assume that you left because you thought you were better, or your child was smarter. And some parents act that way" (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2003).

> **Sonja:** *How do I put it? That is not at all any reason why we chose that school. But it's one thing when I tell my friends about the alternative school... There's this aura about it where you think you're better than everyone else... And I understand that the kids are exposed to that but a lot of what other parents think is that there is a lot of snob appeal. That their children are better because they go to that school. You get a lot from the parents who are already in that school. I think who had to get into the school—it's those parents. When they get in it's like they conquered Mount Everest. That's one aspect of the school I don't enjoy because it's really competitive. I don't like that. I mean each child has something unique about them. I think that's what the school should cherish. Not that they're better than that kid. I can't believe that the parents are so actively involved in the competitiveness. (Recorded conversation, December 1, 2003)*

Even though Sonja's own story challenges the notion that parents select alternative schools because of the status or the profile of the program, she feels that for some parents this is the motivation for attending an alternative school. As she reflects on her own community, she identifies the need that parents feel to help their children to excel as the reason that so few attend the neighbourhood school. This is also reflected in the plethora of after school activities that the neighbourhood children are enrolled in.

Sonja also feels that this sense of competition extends somewhat to the children. Hailey, who was removed from her community school because of her above-average abilities, has now found herself in a school where her exceptional abilities are, to a greater extent, the norm.

> **Sonja**: *I think one difficult thing I think for a kid, I mean it's a very accepting school but if you're an average student there are so many above-average students. You're not dealing with a kid in your class who can sing a little bit good, you're dealing with mini superstars. I imagine if you're a normal kid it's a place where you can feel very... average or unmusical. ...I wonder as well about Mallory's experiences. She came in and had to make friends and has watched other kids get into the plays...*
>
> **Michelle**: *I wonder about that too.*
>
> **Sonja**: *Yeah. It really bothered Hailey this year and she's not typically a jealous person. She had a really hard time. Also the child who got in was rubbing it in her nose. But we talked a lot about being supportive and saying congratulations and*

walking away if someone's being mean about it. And the very next week she got picked to display her artwork at City Hall.

Michelle: *Good for her!*

Sonja: *It was really... She was very modest. She had a press conference at city hall. So I can see how it might bother other children, I mean if it bothers Hailey who is quite confident—I mean I think everyone gets shined upon just for different things and at different times... Hailey got her picture in the paper.*

Laying Our Circles Side-by-Side

I have also seen this scenario played out in my classroom as children who are new to our school (and their parents to some extent) adjust to the fact that in this school they may no longer hold the place of the best... artist, or mathematician, or the one who is reading the hardest books. This is a different collection of children, children for whom this alternative school was chosen because, like Sonja, some parents felt their children would be better challenged or would have greater opportunities to explore their particular talents or interests. Within the school landscape as a whole, this scenario is played out repeatedly through auditions for various school performances and activities. For some children I find this competitive sense extends beyond the school, as many of these children are connected to one another through their after-school activities as well and return to my class with their trophies and medals.

In addition to my experience with this adjustment from the perspectives of my students, I am also familiar with this particular feeling as a teacher entering into a school of choice. I came to the alternative school for many of the same reasons as Sonja chose the school for her children. I came because of the school's reputation and focus. I came because the school where I was situated previously was too small of a box and I was excited by the expansiveness of the possibilities at this alternative school. I came because of the strong, knowledgeable, and dedicated teachers. And I also was chosen. I was chosen because of the particular set of skills I could bring to this unique landscape and for the noteworthy accomplishments I had made within my time as a teacher. However, like Hailey, I left a school where I was unique in that respect to arrive at a school where I was not.

I remember one afternoon discussing this particular aspect with a colleague who was also new to the school. As we sat opposite one another, legs crossed on top of desks, we relayed our experiences to one another. We both had felt silenced in a school with so many experts in their craft and had begun to experience self doubt about our own talents, or lack thereof. Stephanie said, "It feels like a bunch of big fish in a little pond." We laughed at that analogy but I have referred back to it many times as a way of metaphorically understanding what was going on in my school landscape, both for my own experience and those of other teachers at my school, but also as a way to understand the experience of my students.

Mackenzie, Sonja's youngest child, joined her siblings at the alternative school for Grade 1. In some ways, this was a difficult decision for Sonja, as she worried about the transportation arrangements for a child so young, but she also wanted her children together at the same school, and her concerns about her community school had not changed.

In December when we met for the second time, our conversation began with Sonja telling me about her children's Christmas concert. It was the first time all three of her children had been in the same concert, and Sonja was obviously thrilled with it. She loved the creativity of the performances and told me in detail the parts that each of her children had assumed. Her extended family was also very impressed by the quality of the concert and their appreciation seemed to give Sonja renewed pride in her school choice.

> **Sonja**: *...the music has barely even started and I'm sitting there sob sob sob.... It is my favourite thing when all the kids sing together... you are enveloped in their voices—I think it was Silent Night... I love that. The first year I cried and I'm still crying.*
>
> **Michelle**: *I know. It's one of those times where you see the big picture hey?*
>
> **Sonja**: *It makes me want to send my kids there in spite of the bad things. I feel this wonderful magic happen... It's bittersweet. (Recorded conversation, December 19, 2003)*

I think back to the story of my students' performance at my school where I too described the moment as "magic." How does one quantify or begin to describe those

experiences? I understand Sonja's struggle in feeling that her choice has been "bittersweet." I am caught in that same place when I try to articulate for someone what it is like to teach at my school. I am struck again by the idea that it is the moments when we as parents and teachers and students come together "as one proud team" that are the most powerful moments for all participants in the parade. I am aware that it is the special nature of my school that provides the opportunities for these moments to occur. Yet I am also struck sadly by how poignantly these moments contrast with other stories we may tell of our school landscapes.

This feeling is reiterated as our conversation continues, and Sonja describes for me the unravelling of a familiar story. Sonja is becoming more aware that Mackenzie may also have special learning needs, similar to those of her older sister Mallory. She tentatively approached the teacher on several occasions to begin a conversation about this.

By February when we met again, Sonja was feeling more discouraged as she continually tried to initiate conversations with Mackenzie's teacher about adaptations or testing that may need to be done with Mackenzie to identify her difficulties, but no significant progress had been made. Contrary to the conversations Sonja had had with administration when she was contemplating bringing Mallory to the alternative school and was told that children at the alternative school received more specialized attention because of the homogeneity of the students, she was now being told by Mackenzie's

classroom teacher that there was nothing at this school to help. "This is not that kind of school" (Recorded conversation, February 6, 2004).

Sonja's frustration is palpable as she describes her conversations with Mackenzie's teacher and finding herself once again unheard by the people who were working with her child. She is very open about the fact that Mackenzie is loving school and is growing in so many wonderful ways, but Sonja has been down this road before and knows that Mackenzie's love of school will diminish unless there is some intervention to assist her in the development of critical reading and writing skills.

> **Sonja:** *She's just starting. And I'm so happy she's loving it and feeling good. Three months ago she did not want to read. She couldn't. It was too hard. She wouldn't. So this is a huge step. So all I'm saying is I want to take advantage of where we are now, and I want to keep the ball rolling. I don't want her to feel stupid and like she's not as good as everyone else. So while she's enjoying it and loving it, let's do something with it. She said she would try and work in a small group with her. (Recorded conversation, February 6, 2004)*

This time, however, Sonja and her family are familiar with this story and do not wait to feel disappointed by the lack of action on the part of the school. Sonja's parent's in law provide the funds to have Mackenzie privately tested.

None of this is comfortable for Sonja. She is not a confrontational person and is always careful to acknowledge the differing perspectives of all participants, including that

of the school and the teachers. She is also aware that her choice to independently handle this may be perceived as not trusting the knowing of Mackenzie's classroom teacher.

Exploring the Borders of Our Circles

Many times as Sonja and I have talked I am made aware of the intersection of the boundaries between school and home. One story that Sonja has shared with me stands out because of the overwhelming emotion that Sonja expressed as a result of the experience. This was the story of a little girl in Grade 1, sick and still waiting outside her classroom for her parents to pick her up when Sonja returned to get Hailey's homework at 5:30 at night. The nearest classrooms and office had been closed and Sonja was frantic to try to find someone who might take care of this child before she left the school. We talked for a long time about that incident. It was a moment that, for Sonja, changed her perceptions of the children and families at her alternative school. Until that moment Sonja had believed that the children at the school were privileged, if not financially, then certainly in the sense that the families of these children cared about them enough to seek out this school. Finding this young child alone, sick, and waiting to be picked up challenged the vision she had of the kinds of families who sent their children to a school of choice and made her question the school's ability to keep her own children safe.

Over the months that our conversations took place, Sonja also shared with me the story of how one bus driver tried to drop her children off at the wrong stop even while the children protested. Again, this highlighted for Sonja the inherent trust she had that

someone else was taking care of her children, as they could not, as neighbourhood children might, simply find their way home. And she tells me of her sadness when she walks down the halls and doesn't know the teachers, nor they her. She has been a parent at this school for five years but still does not feel that she has a place. The situation with Mackenzie's teacher only highlights the difficulties once again that Sonja experiences each time she tries to cross the borders that lie between parents and school by suggesting a course of action for her child. I think back to what Clandinin and Connelly (1999) tell us: "Borders mark the dividing places. Borders say that something different is about to begin." (p. 104).

> In schools, these borders, these places on the landscape, are made institutionally, and respected by the individuals who live their stories out within the institutions. Indeed for most individuals, they are so taken for granted, so embodied in one's sense of living on the landscape, that they are not noticed. It is only when something is new to the landscape or when something has changed about the landscape that we awaken to the borders. (pp. 103–104)

Sonja didn't express anger that the familiar one-sided negotiation regarding the needs of her child seemed to be repeating itself at the alternative school in much the same way that it occurred at the community school. Instead she expressed sadness and perhaps disappointment. In her careful way her observations show that she is always cognizant of all the perspectives involved and reflect a view that speaks of the boundaries within schools generally, not necessarily just schools of choice.

Sonja: *We kind of talked about that before about your classroom being your personal space...*

Michelle: *Yes, I wanted to talk about that again ...*

Sonja: *It feels like crossing a personal boundary—I don't know if some parents feel that way about the school itself as an institution. Like suddenly they are handed off and they are your responsibility... Like do they expect that you have mittens in the class? Or umbrellas? I don't think like that so I don't know, but maybe they do expect that the teacher will stay with their child if they leave them there until 5—I don't think they are teacher-enforced boundaries, I mean you always had your door open and Mac's teacher is always "come on in," but there's something about the doorway. I mean you always see parents peeking their heads in, but they don't want to cross that path. They don't want to enter. The only thing I can relate it to is territory, or that's your home, your space. The rest of the school feels like common property like the hallways or the gym... I can go there without any problem at all. But your room feels like your personal space. And it is, but it's also the kids' personal space in a way... But always it feels a little weird the first few times until you get a gauge on the teacher and how accepting they are... Even when I came at first to your class and then when you were like here come on in, here's the volunteer bin, and then I knew it was fine. You always said you're welcome but it always takes the first step. That's weird.*

Michelle: *You know what's so interesting—you were talking about parents just dropping their kids off and they become wholly the teacher's responsibility, but here you're saying we take possession of the space and the kids. And we do. I think of the first days of school and we expect parents to just go—you know school's starting. I don't think schools do a very good job of inviting parents in or making it feel shared from the beginning. Because it makes that start harder from the school standpoint a long good-bye is harder, but you're right, but then we have our space ...*

Sonja: *And again, each teacher works so hard to decorate their class and put things up and arrange the desks you may get a feel that it's your space, and it is, but I also feel that ...not that you're not welcome because the teachers are very welcoming but - you kind of do need to be invited in or welcomed in. And our kids are in there. If the door is closed I don't know very many people who would open that door and barge right in. You go back to feeling like a kid.. Shy and hello? (that's true).. And what you just said about shipping kids off on the first day - I mean, the first day of Grade 1 all the parents are there and they want to come in and the teacher basically said you can't come in for the first month. "I'll let you know when you can come in" ... And I understand why, but then a month comes and puff the door's open and you're welcome any time. And it's like why—you're not welcome but now you are! It makes you kind of hesitant. That's Grade 1 and the other years are not necessarily like that.*

Michelle: *No, but true, it's always a struggle. I mean, I do believe that you should be able to pop in and say hi, you're awesome about that. You can hang out and not disrupt the class at all—and then other people can come in and they want my attention right then and I feel like I'm being pulled away from what I should be doing which is working with the kids, and then when I'm overwhelmed it feels like this is just one more thing and maybe I should just close my door. It comes back to negotiating. You want to open the space and have the flexibility but it can be so hard and kind of invites more complications. It's a struggle all the time. Some people are so easy like yourself.*

Sonja: *There is so much more to it than just dropping your kids off. And helping out. I don't know.* (Recorded Conversation, December 19, 2003)

This conversation is fascinating to me as it positions me outside the circle of my classroom and students and allows me to view what it is like to enter that circle. I had admired Sonja for the ease with which she entered into our classroom, my world. But she tells me that even still it was not easy. I know that there is truth in Sonja's description of the classroom space. It was I who described this feeling of being on the inside of the circle with the children in my classroom and the parents who are positioned along the periphery, entering in and stepping out, as the occasion arises to do so. I wonder if we were able to "travel between each other's worlds" as Pushor (2001) suggests, if Sonja might come to understand my classroom from my vantage point, as a safe place where I

feel the most autonomy from all of the voices and at times, conflicting expectations one finds in the "common spaces" she describes.

Closing the Space Between the Circles

As I think back through the months that we have been having our "recorded conversations," I am made aware of a new thread that follows through many of our conversations—that being the negotiating and understanding of roles and responsibilities between home and school, parents, and teachers.

Many of our conversations have revolved around trusting that Sonja's children were safe at this inner city school, or safe on the bus, or safe in the classroom with their teacher. Throughout all of these conversations is a sense that Sonja is uncomfortable asserting her role as parent who has an equal right to speak about or address these issues. Perhaps she is less trusting of her place in Pushor's (2001) "secret garden". As our conversations progressed and the trust between us grew, more and more of our conversation began to be a tentative step for both of us outside of our "boundaries" as we stepped into a territory where we were not as bound by our roles as teacher and parent or researcher and participant. This is most evident by the scope of our conversation and the revelation by both of us of thoughts and feelings that in our traditional relationship might have been very risky to express.

As I think about our stories, Sonja and mine, I realize that for both of us finding a place that fit philosophically with what we believed about teaching and learning was

critically important in our choice of school. And while we have found this at our alternative schools and in many ways have revelled in the creative and energetic atmosphere, we also feel a sense of having lost something else or made a trade. It is a sense that we are a community because of our shared interests and values and choice, but that the attention to that community, or the individuals within it, has diminished some.

Joining the Parade: Gillian's Story of Transition

It has been many years since Gillian and I first got to know one another. At the time she had been a new teacher and was juggling her time between two schools. I had just returned from the Philippines. Our passion for travel and our relative youth connected us, and a friendship emerged. Five years ago, each of us left the familiar landscape of a neighbourhood school and began an exciting journey to this new kind of school, a school of choice.

It is a beautiful Sunday morning and my friend Gillian and I are meeting for breakfast. Over our first long sip of coffee we catch up on the goings on in each other's lives. It takes maybe five minutes before the first story of school is revealed. We are accustomed to this rhythm, each taking turns with the listening and sharing of our stories. Many times we see the shadows of our own stories reflected back to us from the other. And many times there are exclamations of disbelief as the tales are unravelled.

We chatted on for two hours, pausing here and there to order, comment on the cuisine and eat, but always returning to our stories. The

stories hold a kind of fascination, like meeting someone abroad who lives in your home town—the slow and hopeful discovery of one's connectedness.

This kibitzing always leaves me feeling slightly darkened afterwards. It isn't professional—and by and large it's a very negative way of being—yet I find myself there more often. It has become a way of surviving my transition to this new place—our survival stories—and it has become my only means to voice what I no longer feel able to in my new workplace.

The connectedness of our stories empowers me, yet at the same time I feel an overwhelming sense of sadness as I sit quietly and listen and hear the echoes between our tales. Gillian is talking of quitting teaching. She too feels discouraged and wonders how she can survive being a teacher any longer. (Journal Entry, January 2000)

This was a journal entry of a conversation that Gillian and I had over four years ago now, well before my research had begun. Yet it is this conversation that opened my eyes to a story that lay beyond the borders of my own experience at a school of choice and caused me to ponder how other schools, other teachers, were experiencing these settings.

Even now, I can instantly recall the small details of this meeting—the sunlight filtering into the restaurant and our cautious revealing of story to one another as the hustle of the restaurant activity occurred around us. I can remember our giggles as we shared our most outrageous stories with one another. And I can remember the moment turning, when

Gillian told me she'd had enough and wanted to leave teaching. This memory stays marked in my experiences as significant because this didn't fit with what I thought I knew of Gillian. This was a teacher who had survived her first years of teaching with exceptional grace and had seamlessly become a part of her school community. This was a teacher who had her Grade 1 students exploring and creating in the most amazing ways. This was a teacher who had been recognized early on by her administrators and her school board as having exceptional talent, a teacher who was a favourite with parents, a teacher who had been selected to be at a school of choice precisely because of all these qualities. How could she leave?

Looking In....

As I ask Gillian now why she became a teacher, she's not at all sure it was where she was "meant to be," and wonders if her path through schools influenced her decision.

Gillian describes her own schooling as "regular." For elementary she attended her community school which had only one grade at each level. She had the same teacher for Grades 1 and 2 and 5 and 6. There is nothing remarkable about her memories of school at this time. She has positive memories of her school years, but feels her elementary was a pretty typical school in the '70s.

Gillian's peer group were all residents in her community and together they went to the same elementary and junior high school. Even now, they stay connected and Gillian

explains that at the time they distinguished themselves from the children who went to the "other" elementary school in her community.

However, while her friends travelled to one high school, Gillian chose to go to the school her brothers had attended. She loved the art program at her new high school but felt that "she couldn't have a life" with the academic expectations in what was also an International Baccalaureate School. In Grade 12, after hearing some positive comments about the art teacher in the school that her friends had attended, Gillian changed schools. "I thought I'd go there and still get the art and graduate with all my friends. I got there and hated the art teacher, which was a little too bad because I really got along with the art teacher at my old high school."

She paused to reflect on how this choice might have had a bigger impact than she initially thought: "I wonder if I stayed on there if I would have gone into education. I probably would have thought harder about it. Not to discount education, but I probably would have leaned more towards art."

When asked why she pursued an education degree, her response was surprise—"To this day I don't know! I think I probably just looked at the university calendar and said, 'Okay. Which of these programs appeals to me?' I had applied to college and university and thought, 'Okay. Whichever program I get into that's where I'll go.' But I was accepted into both. The reason I chose education was that I knew the requirements are always changing and I thought what if I decided to do that later and couldn't get in. Whereas, I would always have my art portfolio. And art would be easier to get into."

"Just as each of us, in our different landscapes composes a life out of the materials that come to hand" (Bateson, 1990, p. 20), Gillian took a path that was guided both by circumstance and judgement, but also serendipity. Even though her own schooling was "regular," Gillian chose not to be a "regular" teacher. Her dress, demeanour, and creativity challenged the stereotypical notions often held of teachers. And very early on in her career, she was enticed by an alternative school that was self-described as "cutting edge." "During the interviews he [the principal] toured me through the school. He sold me. He said, 'I don't expect you to know about it. We've just begun. It's a new program, the first of its kind in Western Canada.' I thought, 'Wow, I could be a part of that. That's really neat.'... I remember going back to my old school all excited and told them all about it" (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003).

When I read the beginning of our stories, Gillian's and mine, at these alternative landscapes I am struck by how taken we both were by the image of the school and the offering of something, something I still can't put into words—is it the status of a professional? Is it the trappings to do our job well? The opportunity to have voice in what we do daily beyond the walls of our classroom? Like Gillian, I can clearly recall being intrigued about the programming at my new school, but my journal reflects an immense amount of enthusiasm for things more superficial in nature, such as the computer, phone, TV and VCR promised for my classroom. For Gillian it was being part of the first alternative program of this kind in Western Canada but she too was taken by the physical trappings. "I mean I came from brown couches and an orange rug and this school was

beautiful!... It was brand new. They spent money on PD. Every year, two or three staff members got to go to the States to conferences and see other alternative program schools" (Recorded conversation, December 17, 2003). Her actual beginning at the school, however, marks a more focused perspective on Gillian's narrative of events.

> **Gillian:** *It's kind of like you walk in—and I've seen this with every new staff member who I've seen coming in to my site—there's a package with information, [and someone explains] this is the kind of things that are done, these are the kind of things that go on. No one can tell you what to do. I remember that first month. I was told you're going to need to do these things. I was like "What?! I don't know anything about those kinds of things. . . I'm like, I need someone to guide me through this and say, first this, then this—step by step what to do. Because it was just like whoosh.... (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)*

At first, Gillian tried to live the sacred story as it was presented. She worked hard to try to integrate the alternative program elements with the Alberta curriculum. She followed the prescribed routines of the alternative program and sought out "tips" from other teachers. The program "doesn't start until October, November, but up until then we're supposed to be teaching the other parts of the alternative program. Well none of us do that. We blast through social and science because we know we won't have the time later" (Recorded conversation, December 17, 2003).

Gradually, though, she began to realize that there were unspoken truths about the alternative program. It took up more time than they had allotted. It took time away from

engaging in a more fulfilling way with the mandated curriculum. It wasn't being experienced in a meaningful way by the students or the other teachers. Gradually, the sharing of these truths happened between Gillian's teaching colleagues and herself. Gillian found that her attempts to question the validity of the alternative program through more open channels were shut down. Clandinin and Connelly (1995) call this the abstraction of the professional knowledge landscape where "there is no entry point for debate and discussion of the funnelled materials. They, necessarily, must be taken as givens. To debate their appropriateness is to question someone's authority" (p. 11).

It is here that our stories, Gillian's and mine, begin to overlap. It was at this new school, which offered so much hope, that Gillian felt most depleted. It was a school where the lived story conflicted with the cover story. It was also this school that brought her to contemplate ending her career as a teacher. Yusishen (2004) states:

> When I think of a place, specifically schools, I see that when we enter into a place of school our personal practical knowledge becomes vulnerable. As teachers, we do not know the story of this place. As we come to know the place in which we teach, a number of dynamics become critical to our ability to create a space where we can live our teaching lives. If the place collides with our personal practical knowledge—our beliefs, values and images of what we know—perhaps this is the critical point where we begin to feel depleted. (p. 158)

This new school that Gillian found did not fit with her personal practical knowledge of school or with her sense of how school curriculum should be constructed.

She struggled to maintain the cover story of this highly profiled school while staying true to what she believed about teaching and learning. For a time, Gillian fought to create a space to discuss her concerns with her colleagues and principals but found that these conversations were not welcome and her ideas were not honoured.

Looking Out - The School Context

The school in which Gillian taught is part of a large urban district and reflects a growing philosophy that promotes alternative schools as a means to meet the needs and interests of the parents and students within that district. All of these alternative schools are required to balance or weave their individual programs with the Alberta Program of Studies. The program that Gillian's school adopted was new to the district and currently is the only school offering this approach to learning.

The alternative program itself comes from a philosophy that learning should be based in real-world experiences. For five hours a week, classes directly focus on the strands of the alternative program. During this time students engage in these program elements both as lessons unique to the alternative program and as integrated lessons tied to the Alberta curriculum. Part of the expectation is that students reflect on their understanding in a journal once each week. Once a month all classes share their class work with the other classes through demonstrations and activities. Twice yearly parents are invited in to an evening that showcases the classroom work.

Gillian talks openly about how the expectations of the alternative program conflicted with the expectation of the Alberta mandated curriculum. "The [alternative] program took 2½ hours per week, it was supposed to come from the 15% discretionary time that we have in our curriculum... It works out to about 20% though which is basically 2 months of the year" (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003). The Alberta curriculum for elementary schools is laid out to provide the percent of instructional time required to cover each topic, with 30% of that time designated toward language arts, 15% to math, and 10% to each of science, social studies, health, the fine arts, and physical education/health. In addition, 15% is designated as time for other subjects or additional allocations for the subjects above. This is where the alternative program time, in theory, was to be taken from.

Encouraged to "integrate" the core components of the mandated curriculum into the program, Gillian worked to manipulate these components. In the past, the former administration directed staff to draft a document that outlined the connections between the program and the provincial curriculum.

> **Gillian:** *it was like: 'you have to do this. We're going to make this document'. It was... like if you find the most remote connection—write it down. It shouldn't work that way. It should start from the curriculum—like how does this alternative program meet the curriculum not the other way. (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)*

Despite some very hopeful moments where the program meshed well with the outcomes from the Alberta elementary curriculum and Gillian's beliefs, there still remained times when maintaining the different aspects of the program felt draining to Gillian. She particularly felt that the monthly sharing was too demanding and created a situation that jeopardized the quality of the learning because the classroom work was so orientated towards an end product that could be shared.

Revealing the Plotlines

Gillian had been drawn to this school because of a desire to try something new, to grow with a program virtually unknown anywhere else in Canada. Initially she felt empowered and valued to be hired at such a school. She liked the basic principles that this program was built on and loved the possibility of what it might become.

What Gillian found instead was an alternative program that was itself valued far more than her personal practical knowledge of teaching. The school momentum pivoted around maintaining the cover story of the program ensuring positive media and awards of recognition, but the teachers were silenced and there was no place to discuss what they felt was best for the students they taught. Gillian had found a "sacred story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 8), a story from the "conduit" (p. 10) that was not negotiable. Gillian was not permitted to personalize this program; the definition of the program had become the prescriptive "ought" (p. 11). It was this struggle to maintain her voice and integrity as a teacher that led to our breakfast conversation and Gillian's desire to leave teaching

altogether. Elbaz (1992) tells us that "when teachers despair it is rarely because their understanding of children has failed them, but rather because the structure of schooling... makes it difficult to provide for their needs" (p. 426). In Gillian's story we can see that the structure she felt impeded by was that imposed by the alternative program and the school's dedication to it, rather than the children and the personal practical knowledge of that school's teachers. "We know that there are two basic situations that lead to feelings of hopelessness—uncertainty and captivity. With uncertainty we fear that things will change in some way we do not want. In captivity we fear that things will not change as we feel they need to. In both cases it seems we have lost control of our future" (Jevne & Miller, 1999, p. 9). I left for the Philippines because of uncertainty in the changing political climate in schools. Gillian contemplated leaving teaching because of the fear that the situation would not change, not only at her school, but in schools generally.

After much deliberation, Gillian decided not to quit teaching. Like me, she chose escape instead. She fled to another country and became a teacher at an international school. The stream of emails I received told of the rejuvenation of her spirit. She spoke glowingly of the daily preps, the two-page report cards, and the fun of teaching. She also spoke of her trepidation at the thought of one day returning to "real life." For her "real life" was the school she had left and all its complexities. She knew that the stresses wouldn't disappear and had been only compounded at her home school and district by political tensions and funding issues which erupted during her absence. Friends kept her up to date via emails about the situation here. Often Gillian would express her relief that

she was missing all the "drama" but wondered what she would do upon her return and expressed concern about the idea of going back to her designated school. I recall the gleeful email she sent when she received word that her principal had been assigned to another school for the coming year.

This story, then, begins with Gillian's re-transition to a school of choice. After two years teaching overseas she returned to her former school and found things not necessarily as she expected. She found hope. She found a new administrator who listened and gave voice to her staff, who cared about their well-being and who showed support for their work. She also found the emergence of another story, one where the parents at her school do not see the new administration or the changes to the school in such a positive light.

Gillian

...saw an opportunity to become part of something brand new.

Excited.
Hopeful. ...*wow, I could be a part of that...*
Chosen.

...cutting edge, media, awards, international visitors, it must be a great place to be...

Dismayed.
Silenced. ...*don't bastardize the program*
Punished.

...when someone asks you how you are and you burst into tears - that's not a good place to be.

Fled.
Risked. ...*let's take our concerns to the table*
Returned...quietly.

...staff morale is higher, staff energy is higher, shoulders down, less stress...

Hope.
Hears another story. ...*this is why we brought our kids here.*
Survivalist.

A New Story Emerges

After two years overseas Gillian returned to her former school. She was anxious about going back and pleased to see colleagues that were still there, but a little worried too—worried about returning to the place that she had found so depleting. The former principal had left the school and a new administrator would be beginning with Gillian. This fact provided the hope that made a return possible and even exciting. What would lie ahead? Would this administrator hear Gillian's and other teachers' concerns about the program focus at her school? Perhaps the change in administration might make it the kind of place Gillian had first believed it to be, or would the cover story, of a dynamic school with "cutting edge" programming, remain intact despite the concerns of its teachers?

It wasn't long into September 2002 that Gillian realized that her new administrator was very different than her last, and she was thrilled to relay the positive changes to me over breakfast one Saturday morning. "We met as an elementary staff this year, basically parking lot talk, but finally someone said 'You know what? We have a new administrator let's take our concerns to the table.' In the past we weren't allowed to. I remember once I brought up some concerns at a staff meeting and was told by the

principal at the time 'we are not here to bastardize the program.' " As my jaw dropped in disbelief, Gillian confirmed,

> *Oh yeah, that's a direct quote... So anyway, we brought it to the table this year and talked a lot about it. The people who began talking about it drew up a document stating these are the changes we propose, this is why, this is what we hope for, they got all of us to give input, look it over, agree, disagree, make changes or whatever—brought it to Jocelyn [the principal] and she said, 'Okay, I've never seen this run. You guys have. So let's go.' She approved it. (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)*

The changes that had been made were, in Gillian's mind, minor. She believed that the cuts to the direct alternative program time allowed the teachers an opportunity to address the mandated curriculum in more depth and to better prepare the students for the special events that marked the culmination of each program segment. She felt that the children would be happier with this too, feeling less stress and receiving a more balanced program that would better be able to address "the achievement tests," a provincial initiative that evaluates how each school and child is doing in Grades 3, 6, and 9. Previously, Gillian's school was not doing as well as expected and the administration was beginning to feel some pressure from the district hierarchy to see their school's marks on these exams improve.

Gillian: *We were all over the media and everyone was telling us what a great school this is, and how cutting edge we were, and would have these great shots of our kids working, but it never felt cutting edge.*

I don't want to be cutting edge. I just want to teach. I keep telling my principal most of us are okay with not being cutting edge—we are ready to just teach. (Recorded conversation, November 4, 2003)

It was with this in mind that the staff drafted a letter that September to make parents aware of the changes that would be seen in the alternative program in the coming year. From Gillian's perspective, and as she understood the perspectives of other teachers, the program was taking too much time away from the core curriculum and some of the components were not meaningful to the students or the teachers. The response from parents to these changes, minor in Gillian's eyes, was both shocking and dismaying to her. One day, shortly after the letter had gone home, Gillian was speaking with a parent outside her classroom when another parent approached and began discussing the Parent Advisory Meeting, a monthly meeting where representatives from the school and parent community met to discuss specific issues or to share information. The tone of this conversation was harsh. This was Gillian's first sense that the parents were not as happy about the change in administration as the staff seemed to be.

Gillian: *Anne [a parent] said, "yeah, it's about time the parents stepped in here".... So I turned to Lisa [another parent] and said "What's that all about?"*

"Oh we're not happy with how this school is...this year with this new principal. Between you and me I don't like her, this new principal."

And I went "What?! Lisa we are lovin' it. What's going on? Why don't you like her?"

"Oh well, the school used to have this energy you walked in the door and it had this energy. I don't think she has any vision, I think she's just here coasting until her retirement."

This is a woman [Lisa] I totally respect and am friends with. She.. What's the word I'm looking for... "Bought into" isn't right because she's an intelligent woman...

Michelle: *Believed in?*

Gillian: *Right. She [Lisa] believed in Dwayne's [the former principal's] sales pitches... She sees Dwayne as having vision and drive and motivation and climbing ladders and liked that, and that's part of why she brought her daughter there because they came from another school of choice.*

So, I'm just like "Lisa, I'm just realizing it's totally different from the parents' point of view and the teachers' point of view. Between you and me, the staff morale is much higher now." So I was like "the morale is higher, the staff energy level is higher, people are walking with their shoulders down because they are less stressed, we are liking what's happening."

And of course we made a bunch of changes to the program, that's why this core group of parents are upset because that's one of the reasons why they came... School of choice right? (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)

Our conversation slows somewhat as we contemplate what has just been said. Gradually, our talk turns to discussing why parents have chosen to bring their children to Gillian's school. The tension and uncertainty momentarily dissipates as Gillian discusses the perceived motivations of her parent community.

Gillian: *In my class of 28 there are probably at least 75% of kids who don't live in the neighbourhood of our school. At least. Right now it's pretty balanced. Some parents also bring their children because of our proximity to their workplace. In div. 2 you start noticing an increase of kids who come so they'll feed into our designated jr. high, which has a lot of prestige associated with it and is quite hard to get into. Dwayne never recognized that some parents are coming just to get into that jr. high. He thought "oh no, they're coming because of our program." ...*

I said to Lisa "I can really see what a different perspective it is to be a parent and a teacher at this school. I said, you don't know what it's like to work here before and it's very different now. Because when you come to school and someone asks you how you are and you burst into tears... That's not a good place to be." (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)

As Gillian continues to talk it's obvious that her own sense of betrayal and what the parents are now feeling are not that opposing after all.

Gillian: *I think Dwayne was a good sales person, and he had vision... He had all of that, but whose shoulders did he step on to make that happen? He brought in the media. The media were there all the time. We had guests from wherever being toured through the school. And it's like that's great and there are a lot of good things going on at our school, but there's nothing... I mean he always referred to us as cutting edge. We're a cutting edge school, you're a cutting edge staff, I'm going to nominate us for this award... And that's great and every year he nominates people for teachers of excellence and it looks great, because people would say, wow, this school has 3 nominees or XYZ school is in the news again, or look the morning news show was there, you gotta love that. People who see that say "That must be a great place to be."*

Michelle: *It is interesting to think about how parents are feeling now that they see that changing.*

Gillian: *From my perspective not a lot has changed. There were three main things that changed: we cut the time, we used to write in journals once a week [and the sharing times were decreased]. Well, the kids who were there when the program started, there's a handful who are still there in Grade 6 who started in Grade 1. If we think teachers hate these journals the kids hate them more. You know, it's like here's your journal for the year, and the kids would groan and be like we don't even want to see them. That's how it's like. So we thought, this is getting ridiculous. The teachers hate these journals, the kids don't want to do*

them, so what can we do different? So what we decided was that every term we would do a writing reflection instead of forcing it every Friday.

But it's true what Lisa said, this is one of the reasons the parents came. A lot of them. Not all of them. Enough of them.

Michelle: *Do you remember why you decided to go to your school?*

Gillian: *Because it had this great program. Dwayne sold me. (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003)*

Gillian recognizes the lure of the program and the positive publicity that enticed many of the parents to her school was also what convinced her to join this school landscape. She is also open about the fact that parents don't know what's going on behind the scenes in the circle that encompasses the daily lives of the students and teachers. They have been permitted only to see what they were invited to see during the parent evenings, through the media, and through the story of school that parents have been exposed to since the inception of the alternative program. Stepping out of our circle we can see how parents view this change as their circle, their place within the school, as getting smaller. As Gillian's voice is regained, the parents at this school are feeling that their voices are not heard.

I think about our circles again, the teachers and students in their inside circle and the parents on the outside. I think now about how they aren't as distinct as two separate circles that fluidly open or close. Rather, the changes in one circle can rub up against the other even if we do not mean them to, and these instances can change the school

landscape for all the participants in the parade. In Gillian's story we can see that there are others placed amongst our circles. There is the principal. The school district. The expectations of Alberta Learning. How do these participants fit into our circles? We can see their influence on the stories of teachers, parents, and children, but where do we draw their circles?

As we look again at the participants we can see that the circles overlap and twist through one another. We can see that at times some circles seem to be drawn more darkly and influence the size and space within the other circles.

We can see the principal who brought an exciting new program to a school with a declining enrolment. We can see the invitation to teachers to join this place that was different, a place to learn and grow and teach in a way that would push the boundaries of traditional thinking. We can see the parents hopeful that this would be a school that made sense for them and their children, a place that shared their values about what, and how, children should learn.

As these circles shift we can see the participants trying to make sense of their places. The new principal trying to maintain the forward momentum of an alternative program that has received much public praise, while honouring the voices of the teachers who are expressing their frustrations with the way that the program had been implemented. And still, the principal is compelled to look for a way to improve the school's standing in the Provincial Achievement Tests. We can see the teachers reaching out to make sense of their new space within the circle with their students, while

maintaining their focus on the need to improve class results. And what of the parents, who are trying to make sense of these changing circles. The lines, to them, must appear most invisible of all.

From this perspective, it is easy to see how these stories influence one another. The uneasy tension that exists between the stories that lie within these circles is also apparent. Gillian and her school are left with the dilemma of explaining changes to an alternative program that had been previously storied as exceptional. How can the parents then be invited into the inside circle to share the perceived flaws of the alternative program when doing so would mean dispelling the very stories that brought the parents there in the first place? During our December conversation Gillian reflected on this: "How can we now turn around and tell parents all the negatives and problems with [the alternative program] when we have worked so hard selling it to them and making them believe what a wonderful program it is?" (Recorded conversation, December 17, 2003).

This was a realization that Gillian was beginning to think about in a deeper way when we met again in February and discussed some of the themes that emerged from the transcripts of our conversations.

> **Gillian:** *You know, when the alternative program was introduced, Dwayne introduced it as a way to draw people to the school. Our school's enrolment had been dropping. And it worked. But look at how much went into that. But now, to that core group of parents who were sold on it, and who really bought in, now they are seeing some changes in it and foresee it going the way of the dinosaurs.*

They are really upset. We can't let go of this [alternative] program. What would we do if it wasn't there? What if the enrolment dropped? It's all about the program.

It's still a good school. We could still attract people to come here... But it's all about the program. So that's just one angle in this whole thing. In my mind it's the realization that in the open house we will still be talking about the program but we won't necessarily have it. (Recorded conversation, February 22, 2004)

Gillian is beginning to become awake to the notion that the alternative program has become a sacred story and it will be maintained above all other concerns that she may have. I am thoughtful of Pushor's (2001) image of parents off the landscape of school. Schools of choice are one way that parents have gained voice over the kind of education that their children experience. The parents have been invited into the circle of the school through an invitation to join in this alternative program. "Are educators who are inviting parents in being hospitable? In being hospitable are they the hosts? As hosts, do they decide who can play, and when, and where, and under what conditions? ... Are parents then the invited guests?" (p. 131).

CHAPTER SIX

Stories From the "White Space"

The most erroneous stories are those we think we know best - and therefore never scrutinize or question. (Gould, n.d.)

As I tell our stories, Sonja's, Gillian's and my own, I am acutely aware of the places where our stories resonate loudly with one another. Each of us, from our own tiny circles, told a story of transition to a school of choice. I, the narrator, change my place in that larger circle to view these stories from their distinct vantage points but even as I do, I can see our narrative echoes (Conic, Eastman, & Nitsis, 1991) or the connections between our three accounts. These similarities seem to come mainly from the white space in our circles. This was the place where each of us has bumped up against another circle that we didn't see at first. Some of the threads I have been able to identify from our white space and others remain too inextricably tangled for me to yet explore. The threads that I have chosen are not the sum total of all that needs to be explored about the transition experiences of parents and teachers at schools of choice but are the elements which I found resonated most strongly in the three accounts of Gillian, Sonja, and myself.

The Role of Competition

There is little disagreement that competition plays a role in schools of choice. The literature on the topic is replete with the fear that alternative schools, both public and private, are yet another means to uphold class distinctions (Ball & Vincent, 2001; Brown;

1999; Dunk & Dickman, 2003; Hill, 2002). Rittman (2001) suggests that the growth of schools of choice in Alberta has evolved from "the dominant ideology of Alberta politics... The concepts of program of choice and parent involvement remain central to Alberta's plan for restructuring education" (p. 18) and links the economic prosperity of Alberta to the reflexivity of Alberta's schools to respond to the market needs.

Edmonton Public Schools is an example of one Alberta school board that has embraced the notion that schools need to respond to the needs and interests of the parents and children they serve. This board has a long history of offering alternative programs beginning with the first bilingual immersion program offered in 1974. Presently, within Edmonton Public there are over 80 schools which offer a staggering 31 different alternative programs. However, unlike the stated policy of the Alberta Government which sees schools positioned in a competitive marketplace to serve the diverse needs of the economy, Edmonton Public Schools' policy seems to originate from a more philosophical, versus economic, position. In their policy handbook for alternative schools they reported that the reasons for offering alternative programs are:

> [It is] the district's belief that public education can serve all children, and is neither necessary nor desirable to serve them all in the same way. In fact, attempting to serve all students in the same way only succeeds in driving parents elsewhere—to charter schools or private schools that respond to their interests or their beliefs about a particular pedagogy. As well, experience has shown that students in alternative programs generally

do well academically, in addition to receiving the benefits of the particular program. (2004, pp. 1–2)

This policy statement does however reflect the economic realities that exist in a *market economy* when stating that by identifying and serving the needs of students and parents they are preventing the development of private and charter schools. Indeed, when Edmonton is compared with Calgary, a sister city in the province of Alberta, there is a marked difference in the number of private schools in operation in the Edmonton area as opposed to those that have developed in the Calgary school district. In Calgary in 2004 there were 27 private schools versus 14 in Edmonton. And while Edmonton Public Schools has seen a marked increase in enrolment since the '90s and attendance in private schools has steadily shrunk, Calgary Public has seen the trend in reverse. Further, Calgary's top-ranked academic schools, as measured by the Fraser Institute's annual report, are private whereas in Edmonton they are public (Bosetti, 2004). Bosetti (2004) feels the reasons for these distinct differences between the success of alternative programs in these two districts lie in the way that Edmonton Public Schools has chosen alternative school programming based on an identifiable need of parents and students and/or because of particular educational pedagogy that supports their beliefs about teaching and learning. In addition, these schools have been opened in a variety of areas around Edmonton and maintain a policy of open boundaries which means that alternative schools are more accessible by a wider variety of families from diverse social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Calgary, on the other hand, has only recently responded to the demand of

particular programs or philosophies requested by parents by opening alternative schools to compete directly with already existing charter schools. In addition, they have not maintained an open boundary system and their schools are located in areas where parent voices were strongest, largely more affluent communities, thereby decreasing the access and popularity of these programs across a wider segment of the population.

A counter argument to the popular idea that alternative schools are creating a competitive marketplace for and between schools is presented by Hill and Guin (2002):

> How people compete for schools and teachers depends on the way opportunities are allocated. When parents are free to apply to any public school, the most competitive study the options, apply early, and try to make sure they apply to some desirable schools where the probability for admission is high. When parents are assigned to schools, the most competitive learn who are the best and the worst teachers and programs and campaign to get these for their children. (p. 18)

I think about Pushor's (2001) descriptions of class placement assignments in upper middle class schools; the parents lining up each August to see who their child's teacher will be for the coming year and the unceasing requests of parents to place their children with a specific teacher, or with particular children, but not with others. I think of the struggles that the principal, the parents, and Pushor had with, what seemed at times, the conflicting desires and needs of the parties involved:

> Some teachers expressed concern about their placement judgments not being honoured and, as the year progressed, some parents began to express concern

about how honouring the requests of some parents may have negatively influenced the class composition of the children of others. It was evident that there was much to reflect on and no easy answers. (p. 153)

"Scarcity begets competition" (Hill, 2002, p. 18). "Schools are like any other enterprise that depends on people... Someone will get the burned-out old teacher in his last year or the brand new teacher whose command of subject matter and classroom management skills is shaky" (p. 18). It is this uncertainty and inequality between classrooms that awakens the competitive nature in parents who seek to ensure the best circumstance for their children, sometimes at the expense of others. Brown (2000) refers to this as a "parentocracy"—when the expectations, values, and preferences of parents interfere with, or take precedence over, the impartial values of the collective good.

Others (Hoxby in Hill, 2002; Smreker, 1996) have suggested, that parents have always chosen schools for their children, by simply choosing the neighbourhood in which they bought a home.

Are alternative schools then, a more transparent means of competing for scarce resources then the process of influence that has existed for years as a "secret story" in schools and between schools?

School vs. School?

Each spring, the sudden sprouting of rolling billboards that advertise alternative schools and programs line the streets and roadways and remind me that indeed, the

influence of the market in the development and sustainability of alternative programs is central to their success.

I consider my own school and the huge production that is put on each spring for open house as a bid to draw parents and students into an already overflowing program. I think of what the visiting parents and children must think as they walk down the feverishly decorated halls and listen to the choirs, and speeches which extol our virtues and emphasize that we are the best. How can visitors not be impressed when they see the displays and activities and the students eagerly handing out pamphlets and raving about the programs? It's hard not to be sold that this is the place to be. In spite of some of the stories I have told of my school, like Sonja, each year I too feel moved by this display and feel proud of my affiliation with such an amazing school.

Gillian was also drawn to her school by the lure of something exceptional, a one of a kind program that offered something unique, Something special. Gillian, Sonja, and myself have all chosen our schools because we too believe in the notion that our schools offered something not available elsewhere. Each of us has felt that we weren't just going to somewhere different—but somewhere better. At the same time it is important to note that none of us would advocate our program for all schools, all children, or all teachers. We did feel that for our purposes it was the best "alternative."

When Sonja chose an alternative school she was responding to the needs of her children. She sees the opportunity she has had to be with her children and get to know them as people at home and at school as a gift that her mother, a single parent, never had

the opportunity to enjoy (Notes, April 11, 2005). Gillian chose her school because it was "cutting edge" and provided her an opportunity to participate in the development of a program that was unique. For myself, it was the lure of teaching at a school that held a philosophy of learning and teaching that fit with my own beliefs and offered a community of teachers who shared in those beliefs.

As I think about the current notion of alternative schools, I think about the quest of parents and students to find the "best place," the place that reflects, for them, what is educationally right, or the place that will provide for them the right kind of opportunities or exposure as they navigate through the flurry of billboards and advertisements. As I do so, I cannot help but contrast this focus with the stories of childhood that Sonja, Gillian, and I have shared. As I reflect on those stories, the sense of community in our neighbourhoods and the simple uncomplicated memories of our schooling, I am awake to a sense that these threads of experience do not lay in a linear fashion but are inextricably woven and tied to our place in time. Like many others from our generation, none of us went to an alternative school by choice, but rather we attended our community schools. Our primary and secondary education was not influenced by a sense of who we wanted to become or what would best serve our needs in a competitive marketplace. Our teachers were not challenged about their teaching philosophies or decisions. Our evolution into who we have become happened gradually and not through, so directly, the design of our schools.

For example, Gillian's story tells us of a time when she knew she would pursue further education after high school but what she would do was not predetermined in her mind or by the actions or encouragement of her parents. In spite of both Gillian's and my passion for art, neither of us had this aspect of ourselves developed or extended in a particularly thoughtful way. We were not dedicated to after-school classes, nor did our school choices or careers ultimately reflect this interest. In their research, Bell and Vincent found that this shift in educational policy and philosophy towards school choice is "shaped and informed by a set of fears and concerns about social and economic reproduction.... Parents often spoke about the increased competition and risk in education and the labour market for their children compared with their own experiences" (2001, p. 183). Rittman (2001) however, found that parents in her "study chose education programs they determined were in the best interests of their children. They were not overtly inclined to associate their choice of a program for their child with the future prosperity of their child or the prosperity of the economy of the province, which was the goal of the province" (2001, p. 208).

I wonder, is the growing popularity of alternative programs a reflection of our driven society that wants all children to excel and be notable at what they do? Is it a response to the fear that children must be exceptional or the opportunities available to them as adults will be limited? Is it as Elkind (2001) suggests, because parents are unhappy in their own jobs (p. 29)? Is the trend toward alternative schools due to the dissatisfaction with the traditional (or non-traditional) programs offered at the community

school? Is it the lack of parental voice allowed in these settings? Are the advertising campaigns that fill the airwaves and newspapers each spring spurring the notion that parents are failing if they don't make a choice of school?

In response to a draft reading of chapter four, "Sonja's Story of Transition to a School of Choice," Sonja shared with me that education was never valued in her childhood home. Her mom was not available to help with homework or attend parent conferences. Sonja never had the feeling that school was really important (Notes, April 11, 2005). Her strong convictions about doing what is educationally best for her children then, could clearly be understood standing from this vantage point. I wonder also about the role that the regular community schools play in this. Popular notions would say that the alternative schools are drawing parents away from their neighbourhood schools. The rolling billboards suggest that all schools, not just alternative schools, are now compelled to advertise their school's virtues in a bid to maintain and increase their student population. Sonja's story, however, suggests that some parents may be feeling forced to find other alternatives for their children when the neighbourhood schools are unwilling or unable to meet the individual needs of a child.

From the white space of the circle the possibilities for what lies at the heart of the development and success of these alternative school landscapes seem blinding.

Identity

I have told many stories about coming to a school of choice. For our own individual reasons, that desire to be at a school of choice was for each of us, Gillian, Sonja, and myself, a desirable alternative and continues to be one, in spite of whatever struggles we may have had transitioning to these unique landscapes. Each of us chose our school because of a sense of affiliation with what was offered: a program, a philosophy, a community. While none of us ourselves deliberately attended alternative schools while growing up, it is interesting to note that as adults we made a decision to attend these unique landscapes. It is also interesting to understand that we were each chosen to be a part of these landscapes. Our identity has thus informed, and is informed by, the school we have chosen.

I was drawn to my school by its creative pedagogy and reputation for being the "it" school. At the time that I applied to the alternative school, my colleagues and friends supportively remarked that I would be the perfect fit. I love art and, even more, I love teaching it to children. This school offered an arts emphasis and validated my knowing about the essential nature of the arts in education. My two years in the Philippines had allowed me the opportunity to teach as an art specialist and I was excited to join a landscape where there would be continued opportunities to expand and build upon this experience. The alternative school also affirmed what I believed about teaching and learning. In this school, like the elementary school of my own childhood, it was not unusual to see children sprawled out in the hallways creating huge murals depicting a

concept from social studies or students buddying up with another class to showcase a common link in science. There were no classrooms with their desks in rows and this common understanding about the collaborative nature of learning was exemplified with each conversation we had as a staff. The staff at the alternative school had chosen their school because they believed in the same dream, the same beliefs about teaching and learning as I. In a very real sense, it was the common beliefs and talents of the teaching staff at the alternative school that helped to create the identity of the school.

My identity as a teacher was also altered by this affiliation. I knew when accepting the position at the alternative school that somehow it represented a step forward for my career in spite of the fact that it was actually a lateral move from one teaching position to the next. The alternative school had a reputation and prestige associated with it that both enhanced and reduced my credibility. For example, in addition to my role as classroom teacher I had been working with the new teacher induction program in our school district facilitating information sessions on such topics as instruction and management. I noted however, that with my change in school, I was received by the new teachers with a little more scepticism when speaking about classroom management. After all, everyone knew (or supposed) that kids at my school didn't have behaviour issues. When attending art in-services, I suddenly felt that my position as a fellow student in the class had shifted somewhat and I must be an expert as I taught at *that alternative school*.

Gillian was attracted by the *cutting edge* philosophy of her school and the idea that she would be part of a program so new in Canada. She was also pleased to have her

school so frequently celebrated in the media—she was a teacher at *that* school. She too believed that the change in schools would mean that she would have the opportunity be a co-constructor of curriculum with people who were also there because of a guiding affiliation with the alternative program. Research on school choice (Dunk & Dickman, 2003) indicates that teacher "freedom and flexibility, increased decision making, dedicated staff, and enhanced accountability" (p. 50) are the key reasons that teachers choose to join charter schools. I suspect that if asked, teachers at alternative schools within the public system would also state that these factors are central in a teacher's decision to go to, and remain at, a school of choice. As one teacher on my own staff expressed so well, "It is still a box, but it's a much bigger box" (Personal communication, 2003).

Sonja chose an alternative school initially because relatives kept telling her that her child was a fit for *that kind* of school. Later, when she toured the school she found a teacher who "was like a grown up version" of Hailey, and she knew that this was the right school choice for her daughter (Taped conversation, December 1, 2003). Yet Sonja has also felt the judgment of other parents who thought she sent her kids to an alternative school because she believed them to be brighter or more gifted than other children.

Each of us felt honoured to be chosen by our schools. Scarcity begets competition and we each knew, or believed, that the high profile of our schools meant that the competition for our positions was tight. Our identities were thus interwoven with our school's reputation. For me, this occurred in a way that I don't recall experiencing so

overtly before. Sonja says that some parents act like they just made it to "the top of Everest" when they get their kids into a particular school (Taped conversation, December 1, 2003). Her experiences reflect the belief that the challenge to *get into* a school of choice, public school or not, is part of the lure that inflates the reputations of such schools.

The shared identity that each of us feels in our schools creates unity and a shared sense of purpose in the alternative school landscape, but my experiences and those of other new teachers joining the alternative school have highlighted certain tensions as well. In chapter five I shared my story of the "big fish in the little pond." The following written reflections illustrate how initially I struggled to reconcile my own identity as a strong and creative teacher who was chosen to be in this place for my skills and talents, with those of the other teachers, similarly placed at my school.

> I have often wondered how my own story is playing into what I am experiencing now—particularly at my new school. It has been an interesting, even scary, dynamic to watch as we each jockey for position within the school's pecking order. All of us, each chosen for particular skills and talents, now frantically trying to find place in an effort to justify being hired and to fill a need to be valued. As we shift and juggle and grow we awaken territorial instincts in the others already positioned at the school, creating an atmosphere so thick with agendas it is impossible to find truth. (Written reflections, 1999)

My identity as a strong and creative teacher was being challenged and was, in turn, challenging the identity of other teachers on the landscape. Here I struggled to find place beyond fixing the aesthetics in my classroom. Attending to the furniture, paint, and accessories for my classroom had been important to create a functional space to live out my teaching life. However, once those physical needs were attended to, I awoke to a new struggle not belonging to the physical landscape of my school, but the metaphorical one. From the position of my circle I felt for the first time, utterly unsure as to how to navigate or find place within the larger circle of my school. I had left behind the comfort of my reputation as a solid and creative teacher and was now *the new teacher*. Would I measure up to the standards held by the school staff and parents and uphold the stellar reputation of strong and dynamic teachers, or would I be found lacking?

There were three teachers new to the alternative school the year that I began teaching there. Prior to our arrival there had only been one teacher at each of our grade levels. In looking back, I recognize this as being a factor in the abrupt transition I experienced that year. As new teachers to our grade levels we were disrupting a story that had been at the alternative school for four years. Prior to our arrival there had been predictability in who each child, family, and teacher would *get* for the coming year. The addition of a new class at each grade level meant that peers would be split and a predictable placement was being replaced by one much more uncertain. The establishment of classrooms, which for all three of us new teachers was a significant

challenge, led to even more tension as it created a visual point of comparison between those who were established and those who were not.

As a teacher new to the school I tried to make sense of the "stories to live by" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999) that existed at my new school. The collective understanding of these stories are part of a story of school which allow the participants to navigate their own circles in relative safety and harmony within the larger circle of the school context. "They (stories of school) are communally sustained as people support one another through confirmation of their beliefs, values, and actions and as they share stories and recollections" (p. 101). "Stories to live by are shaped by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teacher's cover stories" (p. 4). They are also influenced by history. This, I discovered after some time, was a critical piece in understanding my school's narrative history; a history that was filled with struggle, struggle to create a new identity, struggle for scarce resources, struggle for place within the larger context of a K-12 school, and struggle for each individual teacher to find a place amongst such a strong and talented staff.

As I tried to make sense of my own place I discovered the plotlines of my alternative school landscape. In schools, these plotlines shape places on the landscape which are made institutionally and respected by individuals who live their stories out within the institutions. Like the "borders" described by Clandinin and Connelly (1999)

> "...they are so taken for granted, so embodied in one's sense of living on the landscape, that they are not noticed. It is only when someone is new to the

> landscape that we awaken to them. When new policies are enacted that somehow threaten [the plotlines], threaten to change the nature of knowledge within each place on the landscape, or both, we become awake to [them]." (p. 104)

It is these "bumping up places" (Clandinin, Huber, Huber, Murphy, Murray-Orr, Pearce & Steeves, in press) that cause tension in the story of school being lived out by the participants and for those new to the landscape trying to make sense of them.

Because I felt my identity challenged in my new school landscape, I retreated into the place I knew best—my classroom—back to the circle of myself and my students. It was here I asserted myself comfortably and developed relationships with my students and, more gradually, the parents of my students. "The privacy of the classroom plays an important epistemological function. It is a safe place, generally free from scrutiny, where teachers are free to live stories of practice." (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 13). It was from this safe place that I began to notice others on the landscape, also new to the school and their own bewilderment at suddenly finding themselves in this "little pond" with so many powerful plotlines. Sharing our stories, our 'sense making,' helped us to understand our new school and wonder at some of our experiences. How can I forget my first open house at my school where each teacher, in their own classroom, was forced to market themselves as much as our school? I can see the parents, many of whom already attended the school, asking me questions about my program, my teaching style, and fingering their way through the bins and tubs of student work. I can also not forget another teacher new to the school in tears at the end of the night, after having felt judged "inadequate."

This is perhaps the feeling that Hailey had when she wasn't chosen for a part in the school play. She too had been told of her gifts and talents and was chosen by the school for those qualities, yet at times, Sonja tells us, Hailey struggled with rectifying that identity with those of other students who are also storied as exceptional in their own way. Gillian too, felt this way, when in contrast to her experience as a respected and valued teacher she suddenly found herself on the margins of her school landscape, without voice.

This depleted sense of self as a result of coming to a school of many "big fish" or "big ideas" is a thread which can be followed in each of Sonja's, Gillian's, and my stories. Yet for each of us, our survival and ultimate adjustment to our schools has affirmed our identifies as well. My survival and adjustment to my school has made an indelible mark on my career path and has reaffirmed, in many ways my story as a teacher. Hailey's identity received affirmation when she was chosen to have her work published and celebrated at City Hall. This was perhaps an even greater honour when she considers the "pool" of exceptional children she was chosen from. Even Sonja's identity as a caring and aware mother has been affirmed by the positive experiences her children have had at an alternative school. Ultimately, Gillian's identity as a respected and talented teacher has been affirmed by remaining at a highly profiled school and helping to reshape its identity in a way that honours her personal practical knowledge. This has also allowed her the courage to remain a teacher. During our last conversation, as Gillian read chapter five, she sheepishly pulled out a manila coiled book, decorated with a drawing of a little girl in pony tails and a large colourful heading: "My Story" by Gillian, Grade 3. Gillian quickly

flipped through the pages of her childish scrawl and pointed excitedly at the last page. "Look Michelle, I guess I did always want to be a teacher". There, under the heading "What will I be doing in ten years" was written the following passage:

> In ten years I'll be eighteen. I think I will be driving to university and taking some kind of courses. If I can I might take teaching. I would like grades three or four. I'd like to teach at my elementary school. I like my school because it's fun! I like every teacher in the school. I hope I make it! (Conversation Notes, March 14, 2005)

When I shift my position back from the circle, back from the little space that I occupy as a teacher, I can recognize that the borders of my little circle, and those of others, are not fixed in size or density. At times my circle confidently expands outwards but at other times, shrinks inward protectively.

Choice Means You Can Always Leave

Each of us, Sonja, Gillian and I, were drawn to a school of choice because of the program that was offered, a philosophy that spoke to us, and a sense that the school we had been at did not meet our needs. We were, all three, pleased to be able to choose. The element of choice, however, extends beyond our own decision to join a particular school landscape. It also represents an ideology that allows not just for choosing to attend a school but also choosing to leave a particular school. As a teacher in a school of choice I have seen, first hand, teachers who philosophically didn't fit the story of school that was

being lived out at my alternative school and were asked, directly or indirectly, to consider finding a place better suited. I too, have been faced with a more subtle response but with similar implications, when I have questioned decisions that have been made regarding the alternative program. My questioning implied I wasn't on board with the programming and thereby not living out the story of school that had been constructed. Gillian felt this when she voiced her opinions about the program on her alternative landscape and was told she wasn't to "bastardize the program." Sonja had this experience when she was told by Mackenzie's teacher that the alternative school did not offer the kind of support her child may require.

Interestingly though, this attitude has also been expressed by all of us in opposing situations as well. For Gillian, it was when she faced a parent dissatisfied by the changes being made to the alternative program at her school that she remarked during our conversation "Maybe, it's a bad attitude, but I feel like if you've tried to resolve things constructively and you're still not happy, maybe you would be happier some place else" (Recorded conversation, November 20, 2003).

Sonja expressed a similar sentiment when she was sharing with me her experiences during parent conferences when another parent was loudly complaining about the teacher:

Sonja: *Yeah, I told you about how the family that left their kid outside the Grade 1 room were the same ones that came into parent conferences and said "Let's see how many rules we can break." This parent who is in the same class told me that there is a*

handful of parents that are unhappy and really don't want to be there and are really putting up a fight. I don't know why they're here. They're unhappy and they're trying to sour a group. That's new too. I mean this is a school of choice. We all chose to put our kids here. It's not like it's convenient. And there's a very negative group in that class which shocked me because if you don't want your kid to be here then why are you? It's not like it's easy to get into the school! I don't know what that's about. And again, we talked about what we wanted the school to be for us and obviously it hasn't met her expectations but I don't know in which ways. (Recorded Conversation, December 19, 2003)

Both Sonja and Gillian feel that because their schools are schools of choice, people who join their landscapes should be prepared to live out, and not challenge, the story of school being lived there. Each of us has chosen to go to an alternative school for the qualities or philosophies that these schools represent. Yet, in order to maintain the consistency of this story all parties must be willing to sustain and continue the story of that school. When the teachers at Gillian's school found that they could not live out the story of school that had been presented for a number of years, they challenged that story and created changes to the alternative program. Some parents at Gillian's school, not understanding or supporting the reasons for these changes, felt anger that the principal was disrupting the story of school that they had chosen. For all of us, there is a sense that the program at our school has shaped the school. This includes of course the pedagogy,

but also the community—who has chosen to come, who has chosen to leave, and who was not invited.

It is not just in schools of choice that we can see the intersection of the "consumers," or the parents, students, and teachers in a school, bump up roughly against the agenda, policies, or capabilities of a school. This situation can also be observed in this partial transcript of conversation that Sonja shared about her community school and the reasons she felt compelled to leave.

Michelle: *What about the classroom you that you removed Mallory from - was the teacher open?*

Sonja: *No. You know what? He wasn't. Very closed. Not just the classroom door but his whole... I mean I didn't expect anyone to bend over backwards just for my kids to get what they need but the least a teacher can do is listen and give feedback. I don't think I expect anyone to fix it, but I'm concerned are you concerned? But his back went up against the wall in denial, nothing. I guess I didn't feel any....*

Michelle: *Recognition that that was your child in there...*

Sonja: *Right. It was very much, "This is my space. I'll do what I want. I'm not changing it."*

Michelle: *Wow. So did you tell the principal about your reasons for leaving?*

Sonja: *Yes. She (the principal) just said, "Yeah, I can see why you'd want her there (at the alternative school). Bye." There was absolutely no sense that she*

wanted us to stay and wanted to work with us. (Recorded conversation, December 19, 2003)

Choice means you can leave. This has been repeated in the stories that my students and their parents have shared with me about their experiences at other schools. In the five years that I have taught at an alternative school I have always had at least three students in my class for whom the move to our school wasn't the first such move. Some, by Grade 3, have been to four different schools and as many different programs, a situation not unlike Sonja's daughter Mallory. I often wonder how those students, based on their own little circles of experience, would tell the story of school and what they have learned from such frequent moves. Palmer (1998) offers another perspective on the effects of market driven choice:

> good education may leave students deeply dissatisfied, at least for a while. I do not mean the dissatisfaction that comes from the teachers who are inaudible, incoherent, or incompetent. But students who have been well served by good teachers may walk away angry—angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken.... It can take years for a student to feel grateful to a teacher who introduces a dissatisfying truth. A marketing model of educational community, however apt its ethic of accountability, serves the cause poorly when it assumes that the customer is always right. (p. 94)

I have noticed in my classroom, and in the classes of others, that for a small percentage of parents, whether in an alternative or community school, their motivation to

leave, to seek choice, is in the hope that they will hear what they hope for from the next school. That is, if they change the school they may find that child does not have a learning disability, or their child will have more friends, or will get a better report card.

The reasons that parents and students choose to leave a school are many, the vantage points are complex and interwoven. The market of "school shopping" becomes even more complex as I consider the multi-directional nature of choice. While parents may be "school shopping" schools are also engaging in "student shopping." School shopping is the practice of alternative and community schools selecting which students will gain entry into their program. The selection process can be overt as in interviews, portfolios, references, and grades; or more subtle, based on impressions of how well a student might fit the story of that school. Scarcity begets competition. The limited number of programs, the ranking of schools based on such criteria as standardized tests, and the positive reputation that some schools enjoy has created a selection process on the part of many schools in addition to that employed by the parents and students. While this selection process has been in place for high school students in the open boundaries of Edmonton Public School district for decades, it is beginning to be experienced at the other levels within the district as well. An alternative school's identity informs, and is informed by, their student population.

> There is an opposing view that schools will have difficulty treating parents as consumers when, in an education marketplace, students are the commodities. In other words, while schools will need to attract as many parents as possible, not all

> students are desirable. A school will not be deemed successful if it draws only poorly performing students, no matter how many it is able to attract. (Dunk & Dickman, 2003, p. 52)

Sonja, Gillian, and I have all experienced a degree of this selection process in our schools and also believe that not all students are suited to all school programs. The market economy view of schools suggests that other programs will be created to fill the needs of those students not accepted; yet it is also assumed in choice programs that "the schools will succeed or fail based on their responsiveness to parents' desires" (Dunk & Dickman, 2003, p. 96). We can begin to see how these complementary but competing philosophies play out in the arena of school choice by viewing Sonja's story.

Sonja's story of choice began with her middle child Hailey. Sonja's experience with her community school led her to believe that it did not offer the kind of creative and challenging programming she felt necessary for Hailey. Sonja sought a program that reflected, for her, a philosophy more in sync with her child. But for Mallory, Sonja was adamant that moving her wasn't a choice. She felt compelled to do so because the school was unable or unwilling to respond to the needs of her child. Sonja is quick to point out that she was grateful that there was a choice to go to and that she was able to find a school to meet Mallory's needs. However, her preference would have been to stay at her community school. For her third child, Mackenzie, it was Sonja's desire to have her join her two sisters at the alternative school landscape so, for the first time, all three children would be together. All three children were accepted into the alternative school, but later,

when Sonja began to worry that her youngest may also be experiencing learning difficulties, she was told "this is not that kind of school" and once again chose to hire a private tutor to attend to her daughter's learning needs. Sonja fears that eventually she will be forced to make the choice to leave the alternative school and find a school for Mackenzie that can meet her special learning needs within the school setting.

The white space around the circle of our schools feels clouded with so many choices and factors influencing the decision of school choice. I wonder if choice will continue to make our schools stronger and more responsive to the needs of parents, and more importantly, students, or will market pressures create a system of nomads seeking out a school ready, willing, or able to meet the needs or desires of that child at any given point in time.

Curriculum as Contested Ground

Alternative school programming has created a wide variety of schools with a myriad of different foci and philosophies, but

> the stated directions and practices of public schools of choice may be of two kinds. They can emphasize certain parts of the substantive curriculum such as language arts or the fine arts. Alternatively, they may emphasize how students are taught such as traditional or Montessori. The former alters or intensifies the provincial curricula while the latter varies the pedagogical methods used. (Brown, 1999, p. 101)

Gillian, Sonja, and I joined our alternative school landscapes expecting that these schools would embody all that "regular" schools offered but the learning would be enhanced by either the focus of the school or the pedagogical methods used. What each of us found, however, was that it wasn't necessarily an "on top of," but an "instead of..." I recall trying to sort this out when I first began at my alternative school. I asked a colleague who had been at the school for several years how she managed to get through the mandated curriculum each year with the addition of another program focus, when I found covering the contents of the mandated curriculum alone, a challenge. She replied, not entirely sure of herself, that because the students at the alternative school were more homogenous academically and had fewer learning difficulties she was able to progress through the mandated curricula much more quickly, allowing for the additional time spent on the alternative programming.

When Gillian asked a similar question of her first principal at her alternative school she was told that the children were learning the mandated curriculum through the alternative program and that the answer was to integrate subject strands and blend the objectives from the two.

Sonja was told by the personnel who met with her prior to enrolling her oldest and youngest children at her alternative school, that the pedagogy of the school allowed for greater success for children with special needs and that the size of the school permitted increased funding for students that required help.

There is truth in all of these statements. However, my experiences, and my growing understanding of the experiences of Gillian and Sonja, have led me to a more multifaceted understanding of the dynamics of curriculum that play out in an alternative school landscape.

Over time, I have grown to understand that while my school is rich in arts programming and child-centred learning, it is lacking in areas that might have comprised some of the 15% of elective curriculum time (within the framework of the Alberta Program of Studies) at my previous school. Instead of sports week we have shows and performances. Instead of routine assemblies we have concerts. Being at a school of choice has unquestionably allowed me the opportunity to meet and learn from a wide variety of arts experts, see amazing performances, and expose my students to a rich diversity of learning situations. This has replaced, not been added to, such common elementary school experiences as the presentation by the fire department on fire safety, consistent time in the computer lab, or full engagement in school-wide activities such as "Read-in Week." It is a trade that I have been, for the most part, happy to make, trying instead to squeeze pieces of these "regular" things in-between the spectacular. If there is tension for me, it occurs as a result of losing my classroom time to explore and extend our learning to the extent I might wish. I know that for example, December will be filled with concerts, rehearsals, and special events, and as such I plan to condense the mandated curriculum at other points in the year. There is also a sense for me that at times all of these outside events interrupt the momentum in my own classroom and decrease my ability to reflexively

respond to the course of our learning. In this way I feel that the alternative program mandate at my school both enhances my creativity as a teacher and, at times, constrains it.

Gillian felt that the program at her alternative school competed directly with the mandated curriculum, not just replaced portions of a "regular" elementary program. In Gillian's school the alternative program minutes were actually greater than the elective time in the Alberta Program of Studies. She was instructed to resolve this by integrating the components of the alternative program into the mandated curriculum. Her experiences in trying this approach did not go smoothly. Gillian found that she was spending far more time on specific elements of the mandated curriculum that were a fit for the alternative program and she scarcely had time for other pieces that did not fit. Gillian also struggled with the amount of instructional time that was used towards preparing for the parent nights. Often this preparation resulted in repetitive and not meaningful use of class time.

> **Gillian:** *So all of it is good in theory. I don't disagree with the whole philosophy behind it. That's what the parents don't see. They don't see the time issues. They don't see the curriculum issues. They don't see all the teachers pulling out their hair because they're trying to get all this curriculum done, yet are faced with these things too. We had our show for an hour. Okay, there were lots of positive things about it. But I could have been in my classroom doing lots of really positive things. I don't think the positives outweigh what we could do in our classrooms. And that's what my principal said the other day. She said " you guys could be doing this in your classroom." (Recorded conversation December 17, 2003)*

If we imagine Clandinin and Connelly's metaphor of a conduit as funnelling into the out-of-classroom place on the landscape, we can see that "At a surface level, this place on the landscape consists of teachers' personal practical knowledge, ideas, curriculum programs, administrative structures, policies, and lists of teachers' certifiable knowledge, skills and attitudes" (1995, p. 10). We see Gillian in her classroom coping with all that is funnelled into her school. At an alternative school there is an additional, and perhaps more powerful, story of school funnelled in. This is the story of school composed around a particular alternative plotline—Gillian trying to be responsive to both, feels the tension. When these plotlines from the mandated curriculum and the alternative program curriculum conflict, she is caught between the "oughts" of each. The experiences and understandings that she, as a classroom teacher, brought to this setting were not at first honoured and she found herself on contested ground.

Sonja, too, hoped that the alternative school could offer all her children a program which best suited their needs. While she speaks highly of the teachers, the philosophy of learning, and of experiences they have had at the alternative school, she has also discovered that it does not offer everything. Because the student composition is different than that in a more heterogeneous setting she was told that there were, in fact, fewer supports available in the classroom for students with special needs.

Searching for Community

> Schools must have developed a community of mind that bonds them together in special ways and binds them to a shared ideology.... The culture of schools arises from a network of shared ideologies, [a] coherent set of beliefs that tie people together... Ideologies are the means by which we make sense of our lives, find direction, and commit ourselves to courses of action. In communities, ideologies shape what principals and teachers believe and how they practice. They influence as well, what students believe and how they behave." (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 72)

For Sonja, Gillian, and me, finding a community of people who share our view of schools and learning was central in our decisions to select our school of choice. As my students madly prepare artwork for the Queen's visit, I feel deeply gratified by the experience of planning and teaching this spontaneous lesson with my colleague and sharing in her elation at the rapturous paintings our students produced. This joy that I feel in sharing these rich artistic experiences with my students and my colleagues feeds my spirit and reaffirms my reasons for staying on my alternative landscape. Even through there are times when I miss the feel of a smaller, more traditional elementary school, I know that this experience could not unfold in such an open and celebratory way in all schools. Every Saturday, as I attend the local farmer's market and meet a regular stream of past and present students and families from my alternative school, or when I am invited to a gallery opening from a former parent, I am aware that I have become a part of a community whose affiliations extend beyond the walls of our school.

For Sonja, community has been the aspect of bringing her children to a school of choice that she has struggled with most. While she desires to have her children experience school in a setting best suited for their needs and learning styles, she is aware that she has traded the community that more naturally extends outward from the neighbourhood school for a community whose bonds can seem more difficult to establish. For her, it is less important that the school have a particular focus or specialty and more important that it recognize the individual gifts and challenges of her children. Sonja also has high expectations for care at the school and worries about the seeming "chaos," size of the school, and transportation arrangements. She laments the fact that she does not know the names of all the teachers in the school, nor they her. In this sense, the alternative school has disappointed her.

> These were parents who had come to the school as parents caring about the child they brought who also had a vested interest in the school. They viewed the school as an interconnected community, like home. They expected that the care they provided at home would be extended at the school. They had expectations about care within relations; that care would be modeled and experienced; that care would be visible within the school. (Rittman, 2001, p. 169)

Although Sonja is pleased with her decision educationally, she continues to struggle with the loss of community that she experienced by being at an alternative school.

Gillian sought out a community that was lured, like her, to an exceptional program that was on the forefront of educational change. She too, whispers the magic of

seeing her children showcased at the monthly sharing meetings, and the joy that they experienced when presenting their work to their parents and school community. The tensions that she and other teachers at her school felt while trying to serve the program components and honour what they believed about teaching created a united team of teachers who spoke up about their concerns with their new administrator and created change. This change however, has served to somewhat fracture relations with the parent community and put into question the ultimate purpose of the alternative program at her school. From the parents' perspective we can see that:

> Power was enabling for the parent. The decision about a school program was considered in the child's best interest when it served the worldview of the parent or met expectations related to the parent's knowledge of the child. Making the decision was often only the first step. To ensure a lasting and effective decision, the parent wanted to have a say about what was happening at school. The parent needed assurance that there would be congruence between the choice made and the program received. Power was in the shared decision making with educators. (Rittman, 2001, p. 134)

In spite of the resolution of many of these tensions in recent months, Gillian has chosen to seek out another school to teach in for the coming school year, a community school which she believes will offer her the creative freedom to construct the delivery of the mandated curriculum in a way that she finds most meaningful. She is excited by the small student

population, the ample resources, and the chance to begin again in a place where she need not contend with the conflicting values of the alternative program.

> Community cannot take root in divided life. Long before community assumes external shape and form, it must be present as seed in the undivided self: only as we are in communion with ourselves can we find community with others... [it is] the flowing of personal identity and integrity into the world of relationships. (Palmer, 1998, p. 90)

In the world of our little circles it is comforting to find other circles who share the same stories to live by.

The Meeting of Circles

The transition experiences for Gillian, Sonja, and me speak to this sense of trying to navigate through the white space that surrounds our individual circles in the landscape of alternative schools. In understanding our new schools a significant part of our struggle was in trying to identify how the story is lived out in our new landscapes.

My story has not ended it carries on. I will continue to seek connections both inside and outside my circle and try to understand and move forward and create change. I do see many positives too: secret stories beginning to be heard and layers peeled back and exposed. I am beginning to feel more secure in my place as well. With each new sign a small twinkle of hope reasserts itself ...as we learn to lay our stories side by side and

believe again that this is the opportunity to create the school we all had hoped it would be. (Reflections, March 1999).

> *You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round..... The Sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours....*
>
> *Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.*
>
> *Black Elk Oglala Sioux Holy Man, 1863-1950*

Two voices

We didn't want her stifled
and boxed in
and made to be
like everyone else.
We wanted her to be in a place
where she was appreciated
and welcomed for who she was
and let her be that individual.

I have always been a community type of person.
I wanted my kids to go to a community school.
I believe in shopping at the community Safeway,
I do like that. But
I felt let down
by the community schools.
I didn't really feel any reason to stay.

We paid for all the testing to be done privately

I was so disgruntled.
I went from loving the institution of school
and feeling like community schools are so great
and we should support them...
I looked down my nose at parent's who sent their kids to alternative schools.
I thought why would we do that?
If we don't support our communities then we won't have these community schools.
I didn't get it.
I guess I felt the community school let me down when there was a crisis.

Before, I sat a the table with her
To do homework
And she would cry
I would cry.

I sent her because of the creative teaching..
The teachers are always expanding
on an idea...
The community school she was in
wasn't like that at all.
It was extremely
rigid.
I'm the teacher,
you're the student.
You're listening to me.
Small community school .
So there was no where else to go.
There was no alternative.

None of those decisions were made lightly.

The principal
was a good sales person,
and she had vision... She had all of that,
but whose shoulders
did she step on to make that happen?

She brought in the media. We had guests from
everywhere being toured through the school.
there are a lot of good things going on at our school.
...always referred to us as cutting edge.
we're a cutting edge school, you're a cutting edge staff,
I'm going to nominate us for this award.
we won
and it looks great,
because people say, wow, the school's in the news again,
People see that and say
"that must be a great place to be."

when you come to school
and someone asks you how you are
and you burst into tears... that's not a good place to be.
we drew up a document stating these are the changes
to the program we propose,
this is why,
this is what we hope for,
they got all of us to give input,
brought it to the new principal and
she said okay, I've never seen this program run you guys have,
so let's go. She approved it.

I'm just realizing it's totally different
from the parents' point of view
and the teachers point of view.
the morale is higher, the staff energy level is higher,
teachers are walking with their shoulders down
because they are less
stressed,
we are liking what's happening.

she kept saying "this is why we brought our kids here."

So you encourage the dialogue and the input
- and then, like this women - she literally said it's time for the parents to take over.
"yeah, it's about time the parents stepped in here".

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